

MACABRE CADAVER

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Kristine Ong Muslim

Petersen Schoonover

William Todd Rose

Raven McAllister

C.M. Shevlin

Steven Blake

Sam Kepfield

Michelle Howarth

Daniel P. Coughlin

William P. Robertson

**INTERVIEW WITH
MORT CASTLE**





Nearly Ten Years
after "I Got High."

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“THE POLICE ASKED A LOT OF QUESTIONS.
SOMETIMES, THEY HAD TO ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS
TWICE JUST TO CHECK IF MY ANSWERS WERE
CONSISTENT.”

PRODIGAL

Kristine Ong Muslim

BACK WHEN I WAS STILL A CHILD, brooding and defeated inside one of the crumbling tenements located south of Brooklyn, I had grown to be suspicious of the lingering aroma of stale sweat and liquor in my father's breath. It reminded me of how much death there was to endure while life went on.

Two years of marriage to John Haldane prompted me to have the same feeling of distrust. On the second year of our marriage, he became indifferent and cold. He rarely talked to me. He spent his weekends watching TV shows and catching the phone on its first ring. The closest we could get to intimacy was when I gently turned him sideways whenever his snoring became too unbearable. Still mumbling in his sleep, he would unconsciously take my hand so that I was facing his back and embracing him.

John told me it was not because of another woman. He said that he had always loved me, that he simply felt left out like there was something missing.

Sometimes, I believed him.

Then I forgot all about John when I gave birth to Josie. Josie came to this world looking like a female replica of her father down to the eyes and chin. The only thing she took after me was her red hair.



Josie was now four years old. She had a teddy bear she had named *Pete* and would not stop raving about *Sponge Bob*.

One night, she whispered to me: *Put my plastic doll on top of the stairs and turn off the lamp over the balustrade.*

I called the ambulance an hour later.

We buried John Haldane a week after that. The police asked a lot of questions. Sometimes, they had to ask the same questions twice just to check if my answers were consistent. Turned out, they were consistent enough.

I never told them about Josie. My daughter was blameless. Eventually, they left us alone to grieve and to forget.



I snuggled beside her.

The green glow of the nightlight created a shadow play of a dragon across the wall. It was the same dragon, the very same shape that snarled fire, which had scared me as a child.

Josie told me: *Don't be afraid, Mama. You have been afraid all your life. I am everything you have. I am yours, and you are mine.*

I believed her.

My parents said that I should get some help. They tried to talk me out of getting rid of my “obsession” with a child named Josie. No one would have understood about my daughter.

The next day I gave my left pinkie to Josie so she could munch it with her breakfast cereal. I tried to take it cleanly off the bone so I had to use the meat cleaver.

It hurt a lot. But then, I wanted to be a good mother.

I watched the milk on her cereal bowl dilute the blood as she swirled it with the spoon.



WHAT LURKS

William P. Robertson

What lurks behind
the blue furnace eye?
What manner of creature
conceals himself there
to seethe & roar & explode
in bright violence?
Hell must have bred him
or the forge of some
molten-brained god.
Horrible is his fury,
even worse his pyro urges.

“AFTER AN AFTERNOON OF PAMPERING AT
THE SPA AND WATCHING THE TENTACLE HAPPILY
UNDULATE IN THE HEATED SPRING, SHE WAS CURLED
UP ON THE COUCH WAITING FOR JERRY TO PICK HER
UP FOR DINNER.”

TENTACULOPLASTY

C.M. Shevlin

CLOVER CAREFULLY INSPECTED her makeup in the mirror. She studied the delicate skin around her eyes intently before closing the compact. She winced a little as the snap echoed through the room and cast a quick sideways glance at Jerry. He was slouched in the chair next to her, intently texting on his cellphone, long legs stretched out in front of him.

Clover crossed her own only slightly shorter legs and made a quick assessment of the receptionist sitting behind the mahogany desk. She identified last season's Louboutin pumps and mentally approved the tight pencil skirt and the silky cream blouse that augmented round breasts. She squinted as she considered the symmetry of each globe. They were nice work, she admitted grudgingly to herself, almost up to the standard of her own. Her appraising eyes were caught by a sudden ripple of movement under the blouse. The shiny tip of a undulating appendage peeked out into the lush cleavage only to quickly retreat back out of sight again. Clover swallowed and was greeted with a conspiratorial smile by the receptionist. She was still fighting her nausea when Dr Molnar came out of his office. He offered a manly handshake to Jerry who jumped up and pumped his hand eagerly.

The fourteenth floor office was hermetically sealed off from the noise of the street below. Clover made sure to take the seat nearer the window—Jerry couldn't stand heights though he'd rather die than openly admit it. Just one of the many secrets he'd shared with her back in the day that made her different from all other groupies that hung around famous sports players. She picked up a shiny leaflet from the coffee table, giving a sharp intake of breath as the hard laminated edges sliced deeply into her index finger.

"Let me get you a Band-Aid for that" Dr Molnar said.

"Oh no its fine" Clover protested, clenching her hand tight so blood didn't drip on to the plush green carpet.

"I insist. And can Belinda get you anything more to drink?" he said motioning to the brunette receptionist that had followed them in.

Clover shook her head and Jerry said with a wink to Belinda, "I'd do just about anything for a mineral water."

"Coming right up!" she giggled back.

Clover looked down at the leaflet in her hand. It was emblazoned across the front—BE MORE WOMAN

THAN EVER!—The picture below showed a woman in a brief bikini beckoning seductively—on closer inspection it was clear that the bikini was in fact a large muscular bronzed tentacle encircling her breasts and hips. Another page of the brochure showed a businesswoman talking on the phone, taking notes while a wiry tentacle shuffled papers in front of her. The next page showed her still working on into the evening at her desk while the helpful tentacle massaged her neck. The brochure went on for pages with specifications for size and texture but it was the last page that Clover flipped over to focus on. The header promised that Tentaculoplasty—BRINGS COUPLES TOGETHER!—The happy preppy couple with a tentacle entwined about them, hugging them tightly, seemed to agree.

The still-smiling Belinda delivered her drink and Band-Aid before closing the door to the office behind her. Leaning back in his chair, Dr Molnar steepled his fingers

“Our client pool is still very select. As we’re still in phase IV trials, the FDA requires us to demonstrate that the recipients of the procedure have a real psychological need... Still I could understand if your lifestyle involved a certain amount of stress...” he left his statement hanging.

Clover opened her mouth.

“It does.” Jerry chipped in eagerly. “It definitely does. I mean we’re constantly in the public eye, under scrutiny... there’s so much pressure to keep up with everyone else. Plus Clo does so much charity work, she runs herself ragged.” Jerry leaned forward as if to speak confidentially to the doctor, “Plus its not really the right time in my career for children, which Clo understands, but at the same time she knows she’s not getting any younger.”

Clover, just past her 29th birthday, narrowed her eyes at that.

“Well then, that’s a different matter of course...” the doctor sorted through some forms. “The procedure itself involves the inversion of your own umbilical tract for implantation of the appendage and the anastomosis of your abdominal blood vessels and nerves. There are naturally a few risks involved but no more than any other surgical procedure.” He fixed them with a stern gaze. “Of course, this is a fairly new surgery and I must stress that the long-term effects are not known yet. In the event of dissatisfaction, reversal is always possible.” He smiled a wide toothy grin. “But I’m happy to say that all my clients have been satisfied. Very satisfied.”

After Jerry eagerly signed the forms authorising transfer

of funds, he smiled again. “You have a very generous husband, Mrs Sandler.”

Clover agreed with a weak nod.

Walking back to the underground parking garage, Clover clung to Jerry’s arm as she clip-clopped along in her heels.

“Its just...I’m not completely absolutely *sure* darling...”

“Now we’ve talked about this, sweetie. Tera Walsh had it done three months ago and Phil can’t stop bragging. Since then, the movie offers have just been flooding in for her.”

He stopped and turned round to kiss her thoroughly for a few moments. “There’s nothing to worry about. I just want you to be as hot as you can be.”

Clover remembered the way he’d looked at the receptionist and steeled herself to smile brightly back at him and nod.

“That’s my girl! It’ll be wild, you’ll see,” he promised. They arrived at the Lexus and he opened the passenger door for her. “Besides, there’s talk of a reality show” he murmured in her ear and kissed her cheek.

A week later, installed in the private hospital room at Cedars-Sinai, Clover still hadn’t managed to get over her nerves.

“Are you crazy?” her best friend Audra demanded from the chair where she was rifling through the contents of Clover’s makeup case. “Look at the publicity you’re getting from this!”

Clover looked down miserably at the magazines in her lap. The glossies were emblazoned with her and Jerry’s pictures and brightly coloured captions screamed at her;

-ME AND MY TENTACLE!-

-WHAT JERRY *REALLY* THINKS!-

-CLOVER’S PLAN TO SAVE HER MARRIAGE!-

“The thing is, Audra, I’m not sure what to expect. I don’t really see why I should have to mutilate myself for some fetish of Jerry’s!” Clover listened to her voice get high and squeaky, “I don’t know if my clothes will even fit anymore! It might make me look *fat*!”

“Uh-huh” grunted Audra, not really listening at all as she pursed her lips together to seal in the sheer raspberry lip gloss. She held it up. “Can I borrow this?”

“Yes” Clover said. Her eyes welled up as she caught sight of the magazine at the bottom of the pile.

-I MIGHT DIE DURING SURGERY BUT IT WILL ALL BE WORTH IT! SAYS CLOVER-

Later on in theatre, premedicated with a suitably large

dose of diazepam, Clover felt much better. She closed her eyes and took in nice big breaths of the oxygen like the gorgeous anaesthetic doctor told her to do and tried not to think of the deliberately roomy outfit she had chosen for the OK! exclusive.

She awoke back in her hospital room still feeling rather drunk. It was dark except for the ray of light from the nightlight on the wall. She didn't feel any different. Gingerly and very very carefully, she lifted the covers and something moved within the bandages that covered her stomach.

"Oh!" Clover screamed and let the sheet fall back down. She steeled herself to lift them again and a candy pink tip peeked out from the bandage, moving sluggishly up her body to reveal a length of her new tentacle. It was quite a pretty shimmering iridescent tone and it humped its way awkwardly up her chest using with small suction cups that tickled her. She got up the nerve to touch it and it latched onto her fingers tightly so that she had to pull them away with a sucking sound. It seemed to take this as a personal rejection, quickly darting back underneath the dressings.

"Is everything okay in here?" a nurse walked in crisp white tunic and trousers with her clipboard under her arm.

"Fine." Clover laughed awkwardly. "Just getting to know each other."

"Its okay," she said to her abdomen, feeling ridiculous. "you can come out, I'm sorry."

The nurse looked at her with a strange expression. "Just have to take some obs" she trilled in a humouring voice. "You'll still be suffering under the effects of the anaesthetic!"

Clover shrugged and held her arm out for the blood pressure cuff. The nurse turned off the night light on the way out of the room and in the darkness, as she turned over on her side to sleep, Clover felt the weight of the coiled tentacle cling to her stomach. It felt oddly comforting.

Jerry visited the next morning with a gigantic bunch of spring flowers. "So how's things?"

"Excellent. I've already taught it to hold the brush while I blowdry!" Clover tossed her smooth blonde mane.

"Good, good." He shifted from one foot to the other, keeping his eyes glued to her face trying not to let them obviously slip down to her middle. He looked nervous and Clover was imbued with an unfamiliar sense of mystery and power. "So, can I see it?"

She tilted her head, considering for a moment. "I suppose so."

She motioned him to sit in the chair by the bed and he eagerly obeyed. She eased her top off slowly to reveal La Perla underwear and the tentacle which had coiled around her waist like a belt. Plunged into the bright sunlight of the airy room, it seemed confused and lengthened in a lazy stretch before flickering out to taste the air.

"Wowwww!" Jerry let out a long drawn syllable and got up to stand in front of her, fascinated. He raised his eyebrows suggestively "So what else can you teach it to do?" He reached out his hand in slow motion to touch the tentacle which took fright and retreated back against Clover so fast she stumbled backwards from the recoil.

"It's still very recently postop," she reminded him, feeling protective. "The doctors say it will be a week before it—before we're—fully functional. You're just going to have to control yourself."

"Sure babe, whatever. I can do that."

Clover tucked the phone further under her chin and went on filing her nails. She sighed. "I don't know how its going, Aud. I expected him to be around more after, you know?. Its only been four days and I did have the procedure for him, after all. I thought he'd be more attentive or something, I guess." She listened to the tinny voice on the other end of the line for a moment, "Yeah you're right, you're right. I gotta go, sweetie. I've got an interview with People at one."

Clover sat at the prime position table in the Ivy with her publicist on one side and the journalist from People magazine, Susan Whitaker, on the other.

"We think we have our title!" Susan told her excitedly. Tell me what you think, Clover. 'FROM CLOV-ERRY TO CLOV-ERR-ACLE, THE JOURNEY!'" She paused expectantly for Clover's reaction.

"Uh... great!" Clover managed and both the journalist and her publicist beamed.

"We'll get started then, shall we? So how has the surgery changed your life, Clover?"

Clover considered for a moment. "Well, I find myself watching a lot more Discovery Channel"

"More Discovery Channel?" the interviewer repeated, lost.

"Yes." Clover leaned forward and whispered. "IT" she said, gesturing down to her abdomen, "gets very excited when the marine biology programmes come on."

"Excited? You sound as though you're speaking about another person!"

“Well, on that subject, I’ve been doing some research. Did you know that two thirds of an octopus’s brain is in its tentacles? And that they’re among the most intelligent sea creatures? Apparently their primary defence is to hide and camouflage themselves, but when threatened are display quite marked problem solving abilities.”

There was a dead silence as both other women regarded her with a puzzled expression.

“And of course its camouflaging abilities mean that it works with any outfit.”

They brightened simultaneously and Susan scribbled in her notebook. She looked up and stage whispered across the table, “So how has it spiced things up in the bedroom?”

Clover sighed.

After the journalist and publicist had excused themselves to discuss the backdrop for the photo shoot, Clover was left sitting alone at the table. She played morosely with the lettuce leaves in front of her, watching a grub inch its way out from the salad and across the white tablecloth.

Instantly a waiter swooped down out of nowhere. “I am so so sorry, Mrs Sandler. Let me remove that for you at once.”

“Don’t bother. Leave it.”

“Leave it?”

“Leave it.”

The waiter half-bowed and backed away. Tentacle eased its way out of her top and snatched the grub from the table conveying it towards its tiny mouth like opening at its base where its muscular boneless body met her umbilicus. Clover had already discovered that its preferred sustenance was mussels or oysters but that it would take grubs in a pinch. She didn’t really care—she figured they all had to be calorie light anyway and had already made a mental note to check with her nutritionist.

After an afternoon of pampering at the spa and watching the tentacle happily undulate in the heated spring, she was curled up on the couch waiting for Jerry to pick her up for dinner. He was over an hour late when she finally tried calling his cellphone. It was picked up in what sounded like a noisy bar and Clover could hear a very distinctive laugh which she could swear belonged to Audra, her *supposed* best friend. Moments later, her phone rang with a text alert. SORRY BABE—WORKING. CALL U L8R. JXX

“Working. Yeah, I bet.”

She flopped down on the cream bedspread and pulled the pillow over her head. The tentacle wrapped itself

around her tightly and squeezed her in a comforting hug.

She woke to the sound of noisy snoring coming from beside her. Jerry was flat on his back on top of the covers, stubble decorating his jaw, reeking of beer. Clover punched him in the arm, and he woke in a flail of arms,

“Ow! Whazzzat!” staring at her with bleary eyes.

“And where were you last night?”

“Come on babe, don’t be like that. I just went out for a couple of beers with a few friends.” He pulled her close and mumbled “I missed you...” before kissing her.

Clover tasted the stale beer on his breath and pushed him away, “Let me just go and slip into something less comfortable...”

“Alriiight!” Jerry cheered sleepily and moved his hand down to her abdomen where the tentacle shifted ominously, moving purposefully against her skin.

“Anybody—or anything—else want to come out and play?” Jerry whispered against Clover’s cheek. As if on cue, the tentacle crept up and out from between Clover’s breasts.

“Hey! Why has it turned that colour?”

Clover glanced down and noticed that the tentacle emerging from her cleavage had in fact gone a bright with startling electric-blue rings. “Um, Jerry, maybe you’d better not...”

“Come on, babe, its cool.” Jerry reached out and teased the tentacle with his fingers as it swayed slowly back and forth in the air, bringing nothing so forcibly to Clover’s mind as the hooded rattlesnake that she’d seen recently on one of her forays on to the Discovery Channel.

Her fears were realised when the tentacle surged forward, elongating from her body to become a long thin wire which entered Jerry’s mouth. He gurgled wildly, trying to throw himself backwards. Realising he was speared on the tentacle like a worm on a hook he began to grab at it, trying to force it out of him. Clover’s eyes widened as she watched in slow motion as his arms went limp and fell on the bed. His pupils dilated to fill his eyes and as his head collapsed on the pillow, a trickle of blood exited from his right ear. The tentacle slid smoothly out of his mouth, once again candy-pink.

Clover dabbed her eyes, taking care not to smudge her mascara. One of the police detectives was speaking to her, “We won’t know for sure until the autopsy of course, but the M.E. thinks it looks like a clear cut case of a burst aneurysm. I’m very sorry, ma’am.”

“Its just such a shock,” she sniffed and angled herself



so her best side was to the paparazzi beyond the security gate. “We had a whole life ahead of us.”

“There, there,” the detective soothed her with an arm around her shoulders. Clover laid her head prettily on his neck and appraised his Irish-Italian dark good looks with interest. The tentacle bulged suddenly against the lycra of her top and his eyes took on a look of prurient fascination.

She smiled.

“BACK TO ZEN, MY FRIEND. THERE IS NO
SEPARATION BETWEEN MORT CASTLE, WRITER,
AND TEACHER, AND MENTOR, AND COLLEAGUE,
AND . . . ”

INTERVIEW WITH MORT CASTLE

Interview by Emmanuel Paige

MORT CASTLE is an American horror author and writing teacher, with a dozen books, novels, and collections, as well as hundreds of short stories to his credit. He contributed to *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy, and Science Fiction* by J.N. Williamson, served as editor of both *Writing Horror: A Handbook* By the Horror Writers Association and the updated and revised *On Writing Horror*. He is a founding member of the Horror Writer's Association. He has been (and is) a musician, stand up comedian, high school English teacher, a magazine and comic book editor, and a mentor, and teaches in the fiction writing department of Columbia College Chicago in the largest college writing program in the nation. He is a Bram Stoker Award nominee (six times), and has been nominated for the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for the collection, *Moon on the Water*. In 2000, The Star / Chicago Sun-Times Newspaper Group named him as one of “21 Leaders in the Arts for the 21st Century in Chicago.” Along with Gary Braunbeck, Gemma Files, and Cody Goodfellow, Castle is one of the four authors in the forthcoming

Dark Arts anthology *Mighty Unclean*, the deluxe edition of the comics formatted book he edited and produced. J N Williamson's *MASQUES* will be released in May, and there's a new collection of stories announced from Full Moon Press for 2009, entitled *New Moon on the Water*. The Polish edition of Newsweek cited two of Castle's books as



the “best published in Poland in 2008.”

Macabre Cadaver: Hello Mort, thank you for taking the time to chat with us. Let’s get right to business.

You stated that you have a crazy schedule and keep saying that it is time to slow down—but never do. Has it always been this way, or is this a new development in your career?

Mort Castle: Like Jimi Hendrix had it, “I want to see and do . . . everything.” As you age, you have to be careful that your interests and activities don’t diminish and that you don’t become narrow in your views. You have to keep on doing—or you’re sitting on the sofa, clucking your tongue about how crummy the world has become and listening to the sound of your brain turning to pudding.



Yeah, I’m busier than I had thought to be at this stage of the game—but I’m having more fun with it. Still teaching, still writing, and playing a lot better slide guitar and banjo than I used to.

Macabre Cadaver: When I was a kid, way back when, I had a copy of *How to Write tales of Horror*,

Fantasy, and Science Fiction by J.N. Williamson, and I read it over and over until the pages were dog-eared and falling out. I remember your piece in it, about setting and character. That was the best collection of writing tips I have ever read.

Mort Castle: I’m glad. I loved that book, loved being a part of it. And the hell with modesty. You check your copy, you’ll see that Jerry Williamson noted I had the idea for the book. And what a good book it was and is.

And it brought us royalties for 12 years.

Macabre Cadaver: Your writing career extends over four decades, with a novel about every ten years, and numerous short stories and collections in between. Have you ever regretted not pumping out a novel every year, or have you relished taking your time and completing the books as they naturally develop?

Mort Castle: My first love is short stories. Were you able to support yourself in our time(s) with nothing but short stories, that’s the way I’d have gone and would go.

I have to admit, had there been publishers saying, “We need another novel from you,” then maybe I’d have gone that way—as long as I could have been sure of not just pumping it out. I look at some of the folks who’ve done that—become known as prolific . . . Yeah, they can turn out another mediocrity every three months. And they have written on their tombstones, HE WROTE 12,564 NOVELS NO ONE COULD REMEMBER READING AFTER HE TURNED THE LAST PAGE.

But there wasn’t a demand for Mort novels, okay? Surprising, maybe, because *THE STRANGERS* was strong enough that it got major motion picture interest and options and *CURSED BE THE CHILD* (It was #9 on the list of 10 Best Novels in Poland in 2008 according to Polish *NEWSWEEK*) sold about 100,000 copies.

But okay, there was always a market for my short stories.

And, going full circle, short stories give me something that novels have not provided. I have 15-20 short stories out of all I have done that I consider “Yup, got it right with this one.” They are my shot at literary immortality. I’d put them up

alongside the work of anybody.

I've never had a novel that made me say, "Yeah, this is a perfect novel." I've had stuff in every novel I've published—and, by the way, I've published seven novels, even though I don't claim some of the early ones—that has pleased me, but no book in itself has ever let me congratulate myself for doing it absolutely right. (There are such books. David Morrell's *FIRST BLOOD*. Stewart O'Nan's *LAST NIGHT AT THE LOBSTER*. Ron Hansen's *ATTICUS*.)

Macabre Cadaver: In your own words, finish this sentence: Mort Castle is . . .

Mort Castle: He definitely is.

And if you're at all hip to Zen, you understand what I'm saying.

Macabre Cadaver: Do you work better with a deadline?

Mort Castle: Sometimes. Except when I don't. In the early days, it was essential for me. Now, well, there's no deadline I won't shrug off if it means instead that my wife Jane and I are going to see a play on the spur of the moment.

Macabre Cadaver: Do you like teaching and mentoring better than writing in general?

Mort Castle: Back to Zen, my friend. There is no separation between Mort Castle, writer, and teacher, and mentor, and colleague, and . . . Hey, my favorite cartoon character is Popeye, because just like that squinty eyed sailor, "I Yam what I Yam and 'at's all What I Yam."

Macabre Cadaver: Who was a major influence on your writing career?

Mort Castle: Mrs. Curlin and Mrs. Nanberg and Mrs. Kurtz, grade school teachers who read us Poe's horror stories and didn't worry about whether we would be traumatized bedwetters and psycho killers.

Plenty of writers I've never met, but above all, Hemingway. He makes you honest to God see.

That fine blues musician, Josh White, who was very patient with this (then) smart mouthed

kid and taught me some guitar and ever so much about what it means to be an artist—to spend a life making art.

The poet Lucien Stryk, who first helped me think of myself as an Artist (yeah, capital A) and not to think it pretentious to do so.

(Digression: Most of these yaps who say "Art is too high hat. I just make entertaining stories" are way off because their stuff is not entertaining to an audience who wants something more than a shoot 'em up video game.)

And of course, my dear spiritual big brother, the late Jerry Williamson, who actually taught me a number of writing techniques, particularly about "auctorial distance," and never stopped caring about his art and craft and the people he helped in the art and craft.

Macabre Cadaver: Who is your favorite author?

Mort Castle: That above mentioned Hemingway is the guy I read and read again. But there are dozens of superb writers. You can read 24 hours a day for the next 100 years and always find it a worthwhile endeavor.

Macabre Cadaver: What is your writing schedule?

Mort Castle: Now, I write when I feel like it.

Usually feel like it three or four times a week. Usually feel like it when I ride the train to the city and back and my mini-keyboard does a fine job. Usually feel like it when I've signed a contract and want to churn it out to meet a deadline.

When I writes, as Popeye might put it, I writes. And when I don't, I don't.

Macabre Cadaver: What is the most recent novel you have read?

Mort Castle: Not naming it, because it was so damned bad that this Mr. Bestseller had no business seeing this in print. A protagonist whose motivation came right from the Fox Network. Dialogue that made me think the author had not only never heard humans, he might well not have been human. A twelve page plot stretched over 600+ pages.

Last good novel I read was Garrison Keillor's *PONTOON*—and that guy is a major American novelist, not just the “humor book” writer or “radio host” he's thought of as—or dismissed as.

Macabre Cadaver: You are a musician as well as a writer? What instruments do you play? What is your favorite style of music?

Mort Castle: I play anything with strings, fiddle, guitar, banjo, dobro, lap steel—and harmonica. I play lots of instruments passably instead of any one of 'em really well. If you want Mort in the folk mode . . .

Here you go—this 1965 album is still listed on ebay.



Macabre Cadaver: Is the horror genre dying? Is it still a viable form?

Mort Castle: No genre ever truly dies. So, of course it's viable . . . Viable enough so that “historical horror” by Dan Simmons, a book called *DROOD*, just got nice notice in *The New Yorker*. Most of us who've lasted have stopped worrying about “what it's called”; we write what we wish to write, try to do it well, and if we succeed, we find a publisher who'll put it out there, maybe calling it “dark fantasy” or “supernatural suspense” or “Neo-Platonist Post Deconstructionist Modernistic Imagism.”

Genre is a label and a label is what gives the minimum wager his direction as to what shelf to put the book on at Borders.

Macabre Cadaver: Today the Internet is king, and word processors, desktop publishing, POD and vanity presses are lucrative and thriving businesses.

Fiction writing has become this hideous thing of gargantuan proportions where would-be writers of every walk of life have now written a book and are seeking to be published or have self-published. How is the publishing industry to cope with this over-proliferation?

Mort Castle: I'm not so sure there's over proliferation.

The wonderful Web has made it possible, however, for more people to be deluded that they are in fact writers—because they have been Web published. Or self-published on the cheap. Or . . .

In the meantime, big publishers and small publishers put out books, period—and the vast majority of those books are competently written—and find their audiences, whether that be a niche of 500 (what a typical book sells in the USA on average) or 50,000.

And the deluded, with their over “80 copies sold if you count my mom buying 53” and “The website had over 12 hits in 12 months,” continue to think of themselves as writers.

By their lights, they are writers. According to their friends, they are writers. Judged by writers, they ain't no writers.

Macabre Cadaver: What do you think of National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo)?

Mort Castle: Gets people writing, so that's good. Gets people writing, so that's bad.

Macabre Cadaver: As the editor of a magazine, I find that a lot of submissions seem to be of an unfinished quality, rushed, and carelessly formatted. Do you think that writers are in a hurry and skip the essential revision process in order to seek publication quicker?

Mort Castle: Sure. That's as it's always been.

This is a game for the patient. If that's not you, try shoe sales or standup comedy. You know pretty quick if you're doing it right—or if you need to work on the shtick and the shpritz.

Macabre Cadaver: Do you think the quality of writing today is less than it was, say, an hundred years ago?

Mort Castle: What is good is very good—same as always.

What is bad is very bad—same as always.

What's in the middle is still the middle, with the best of the middle learning toward good—and most of the rest leaning toward bad.

That might be different than 100 years ago, but what do I know? I'm old but not that old.

Macabre Cadaver: Do you think that word processors and the World Wide Web are detrimental to writing?

Mort Castle: These are tools, period. They are neither good nor bad. A hammer is good if I drive a nail with it. Less good if I smack my finger, and still less good if I thump you on the head.

I love being able to research on the 'net. I hate being able to fool myself I'm researching if I simply dawdle from this website, listing all the three legged Kentucky Derby winners to this one, showing me Mennonite pornography.

Word processing? I did a grand job of it with my Smith-Corona typewriter—and Shakespeare did okay with his model “fresh from the goose's tail.”

Macabre Cadaver: Are kids reading more or less these days?

Mort Castle: Probably more—at least the kids I see. You know, I work in many high schools—and all these kids are carrying non-assigned books with them. Harry Potter and Stephanie Meyer and all that stuff with dragons and angels and stuff.

Maybe they play a lot of videogames and waste hours texting each other to no particular purpose (kids are supposed to have a purpose?) but they are reading.

Macabre Cadaver: If a newbie writer told you they were considering a career as a “Best Selling” novelist what would you tell them about the business of writing and publishing today?

Mort Castle: The truth: You can starve to death or you can make a fortune—but it's tough to earn a living.

Just like always.

Macabre Cadaver: Where do you get your ideas for your stories?



Mort Castle: Everywhere. If your sensory inputs are functioning three days out of seven, you should never run out of ideas.

The root of creativity is making connections. When I learn about Marilyn Monroe's seeking “Daddy” all her life and that Hemingway always wanted a daughter . . .

When I hear a kid ask “Mom, am I pretty?”
And Mom says, “No.”

When I see the reconstructed gallows where we had the last legal hanging in Illinois . . .

—get the smell of that waiting room at the hospital's surgical unit . . .

You don't have to seek ideas. They come to you.

Macabre Cadaver: Do you have any words of wisdom for aspiring writers?

Mort Castle: From the late poet Bill Wantling: Walk slow and drink a lot of water.



TEASER FOR STORY GOES HERE ...
“I COVERED HER EYES AND PRICKED THE NEEDLE
INTO HER SHOULDER. SHE QUIVERED AND GRUNTED.
I INJECTED THE CLEAR FORMULA INTO HER BODY.”

THE MAN ON TOP BUNK

Steven Blake

IT WAS LIGHTS OUT. The man on bottom bunk was Ben Ramsay, an unlucky thief who'd spent more time locked up than he had a free man. Ben was doing time for armed robbery on a truck carrying DVD players and widescreen TVs. He had five months left and he counted every day. Rudolph Feuds was on top bunk. Rudolph was relatively new inside. Ben had seen him in the yard a few times, and he walked as if not fussed about where he was. Either prison life hadn't hit him yet or he had too many screws loose and incarceration didn't bother him.

Lights out was probably the hardest part of the day. This seemed to be the time when you thought about what you've lost and what was facing you in the terms of sentence. If anything was going to crack him, Ben thought that this would be the time.

'Don't let it get to you. You'll adapt. So, you gonna tell me what you did or am I just gonna have to guess?' Ben's voice jarred slightly off the block walls. Rudolph said nothing. 'Christ, just thought you might wanna tell me?' He lowered his voice to drone out the ricochet effect.

'Why?' Rudolph's crisp voice was gentle.

'Christ, brother, we share most of the day together, you might as well tell me what you did that got you stuck

in this shithole.'

'I killed people.' Ben's eyes opened fully, white as paper and as huge as moons.

'Shit, you killed peoples?' There were killers in this prison but Ben Ramsay made sure he stayed away from them. And you could usually tell them apart from the rest the same way you could tell the Klu Klux Klan from the Africans.

'I did a bad thing and they came for me.' Ben sat up and folded his legs over the side of the bed. He put a hand on his jaw and rubbed the stubble. His eyes moved to the disposable razor on the sink.

'Who came for you?' Rudolph paused. 'C'mon, man, you've told me this much.' Ben twitched in the silence, still looking at the razor.

'The boy's family.' Ben's eyes moved unconsciously to the cabinet under the sink. The door was ajar.

'Yo, what'd you do, man?' Shifting weight. The mattress springs groaned above him. Ben's head tilted up to the top bunk.

'I hit a young boy with my car.' Ben said nothing for a few seconds and thought about what Rudolph had just said. All he could hear was the old man's throaty breaths.

‘You killed a kid by hit and run. . . . *shit!* Why didn’t you stop, man?’ Ben licked his lips. For some reason his palms were sweaty.

‘It was either the boy or my little Melinda. She was hurt and I had to get her home to mend.’ Ben frowned. He rubbed his nose. ‘So I chose to get her home before it was too late. I couldn’t let Melinda die in my car.’ Ben stood up and stretched his legs.

‘Damn, that’s some shitty choice—rather you than me. So you gonna tell me the rest . . . what happened and that?’ Standing up, he could see that Rudolph had his back to him. ‘You gonna tell me, man? Got me intrigued.’ Rudolph turned over and in the darkness; it was almost impossible to see his gaunt, aging face. Strands of his grey hair stuck out in the dark like strands of aluminium.

‘I’m not a bad man. I am guilty, but apart from hittin that child, I never actually hurt anyone.’

‘You said you killed peoples,’ Ben said.

‘I hold myself responsible for the deaths of four people but I didn’t actually kill them. I never meant to hurt anyone.’ This made Ben a little nervous.

‘So what happened then, you got me confused.’ Rudolph breathed in deeply again and made himself comfortable.

‘I’ll tell you, but you must promise me you’ll never speak of this again.’ Rudolph waited for his answer.

‘Yeah, no problem.’

‘As I said, I hit the little boy with my car and I had Melinda in the back, almost dead. I couldn’t let her go—I didn’t know if she’d be the same when she came back . . . I couldn’t risk it!’

‘Oh . . . kay.’

‘I stopped the car and glanced back in the mirror. The boy was on his front and there were bits of glass from my headlights all over the road. Then I saw someone runnin and that’s when I panicked. Melinda was on the back seat and she wasn’t doin too well. I sped off, and knew if I thought about the boy I would weaken . . . so I blocked him out of my head. How hard I’d hit him, I knew I’d killed him.

‘So I raced home. My heart was pumpin so hard I thought it would burst in my chest. When I got home I had to stop and try and calm down. Tellin myself that things were okay.

‘I had a two car garage. I had a lot of old furniture in there mainly, but the other side I kept clear for my car. It’s an old Volvo, nothing to shout about. I locked myself in the car and dropped my face into my hands. I could feel

my heart poundin. I was so scared.’ Ben sat back down on the edge of the bed and occasionally looked up.

‘Once I’d calmed down I went back to Melinda. She was dyin! My child, she was nearly a hundred years old, *and she was dyin in my car!* Ben’s puckered, confused face softened. Had he heard right?

‘I got out and hurried to the back of the car. I scooped Melinda into my arms. She twitched and grumbled. I hurried inside, to the kitchen. I put her down on the table and rushed to the cupboard next to the sink. I kept a medical box in there. I took it out—after a second of frantic searchin—and set it on the table. My fingers were shakin so badly I don’t know how I managed to get the box open.

‘There was only one left. I picked out the syringe. It was loaded with the gift of life, the syrup of healin. The box was empty now and I felt afraid and I was sad. It was the end of an era of magic, you see. I was about to make extinct one of the greatest discoveries of science since the creation of lasers.

‘I held it tight, tryin to steady my hand. “You can do it, calm down,” I said to myself.’

‘So, ang on . . . Melinda’s your daughter . . . no, can’t be. Shit, your mother?’ Ben asked.

‘I’m gettin to that. You asked to hear this, now listen. Melinda was groanin again. Ben, I was so scared. *She needed healin!* My hands were steady now. “You’re okay, Daddy’s gonna heal you”,’ I told her.

‘I pulled back the blanket, not only to inject her but to give her a bit of air. Her beautiful little face peered up at me. Her tiny black eyes were squinted. I stroked her head. There was dried blood in her fur. My little capybara was hurt, but I had the medicine to fix her. I couldn’t let her turn stiff. . . I couldn’t let her go back to the way I’d found her. All stuffed and nailed to a plaque like some football trophy. She is so beautiful and I love her, she is my baby.’ Ben rushed off his bed.

‘*What’s a fucking capybara?*’ Rudolph seemed not to hear, or had chosen to ignore him.

‘I covered her eyes and pricked the needle into her shoulder. She quivered and grunted. I injected the clear formula into her body. I guess you wanna know where I got this stuff from, this medicine. I got it from my father and my father got it from his. You must understand somethin; infertility is hereditary in my family. They always used on it themselves, you see. They injected themselves with it, and I’m the evidence. Rudolph Germaine Feud, the livin proof of my family’s formula.

‘But I found my Melinda and I fell in love with her.

I didn't need a woman to be happy and to give me a child. I'd found my child. My little capybara and she loves me more than any woman could. I gave her life again. I brought her back from the dead, took her from that antique shop and gave her life.' Ben didn't know if to laugh or scream.

'Melinda was more settled, her eyes were still dim and weak, but I knew in time she would be back to normal. And before you ask, I had completely forgotten about the boy I'd hit with my car.

'Melinda slowly woke a few hours later. I was sittin in the livin room in my rocker, drinkin whiskey. I had put her by the fire. I sat in the evenin gloom with the glow and twirlin shadows of the fire waltzin across the carpet like ballroom dancers. I watched her come back to me, and it made me warm inside.' Ben shook his hanging head in disbelief.

"How are you feelin?" I had asked her. Melinda looked around, and then she saw me. The shine and life had returned to her eyes. Her mouth opened, showin off her incisor. She grunted. Capybaras sound like guinea pigs. "I thought I was gonna lose you, my dear." She trotted over to me. The last time I weighed her she was nearly three stone—same size of a Jack Russell I suppose. That's when they came for me. The door crashed open.' Ben lifted his head.

'I leapt off my rocker, Ben, scared to death. Melinda was standin on her back feet, eyein the noise from the hallway. Another slam and my door came off its hinges. The rantin and shoutin lit up my house. I put my glass of whiskey on the floor and stood up. Someone ran upstairs. Someone had gone to the kitchen.

'My eyes dropped to the door knob turnin. I glanced back at Melinda. She had gone stiff, posed like she was the day I first saw her on the plaque in the shop. God she was intelligent, what a defence mechanism.

'I edged away from the door, eventually pressed against the windowsill. My eyes unblinkin. My stomach had turned into a ball of knots. My breath shrank. The livin room door slammed open and a big fellow with broad shoulders surged in.' Rudolph cleared his throat and paused briefly.

"*I got him!*" he cried, and his friends came runnin. The other two men were just as big, but didn't seem as upset as this man did. "You left him to die. . . you left my boy to die in the street," he shouted at me. I remembered now, for the first time in hours I remembered what I'd done. I was a killer. I'd murdered a young boy. I'd been so hooked on gettin Melinda healed I'd forgotten about

the boy I'd hit with my car.

'The boy's father leapt at me and so did the other two men. I really believe they would have killed me. I was too emotionally messed up to have reacted, to have defended myself. I'd taken a child's life.

'The boy's father punched me and tore open my face. I could taste blood in my mouth. I fell to one knee by my rocker and groped for somethin to help me up. I heard the man's heavy footsteps thumpin across the room. Next, he hit me in the ribs and more pain exploded in my body. I thought I was going to die.

'I was on my back now, and all three of them surrounded me. My vision was blurred and the colourful, soundless vertigo in my head made it hard for me to see who it was that was actually hittin me. I looked to my side, next to my rocker and saw Melinda's smooth black eyes and her shrewd, frozen expression. That's when her mouth opened and her incisor stuck out like a tiny dagger. Capybaras are not hostile creatures nor are they carnivores, but what got Melinda heated was her love for me. She only did what these men were doing to me—retaliatin.

'The boy's father's head snapped up as Melinda crashed into him, knockin him off his feet. Her front tooth burrowed into his throat as soon as she latched on to him. He screamed so loud he made me jump. The two other men stumbled back in horror. I bet they thought it was some type of dog, they had to have. . . she was the same size.' Soft humour travelled in Rudolph's voice.

'Melinda turned on the other two then, and her rage had only just ignited. She had gotten the taste of blood in her mouth. Melinda went after the one that tried runnin. She tore him down, slammin him against the hallway floor. She virtually chewed down to the bone. Tearin strips of flesh from the back on his neck like pieces of fabric. The sound of his fingernails clawin along wooden floor rings in my head even now. The man screamed to the skies of Heaven.

'Melinda skulked up to the final man, who was flat against the livin room wall. His eyes scattered from his two dead brothers to me to Melinda. I called to her to stop, but she was in her zone now. She went straight for the throat as she had done with the boy's father. I covered my ears. I couldn't listen to those screams anymore. Pitches of agony. How can I blame her, Ben, she was just protectin me. When she moved away from the dead man . . . there was still blood streamin from his throat. I heard police sirens comin. Comin for me!' Ben licked his dry lips and shook his head softly.

'Jesus, man, I think you've got some fucking problems

. . .’ He glanced up at the shifting weight.

‘I assure you, it’s the truth . . . you must know Trixie, the man who gets things?’

‘Mm, I know him, yeah, why?’

‘I told him there would be a stuffed animal waitin for him in the delivery port and there would be plenty of cigarettes for him if he got it to me.’ Ben slowly looked up from the floor. His face icy and unnerved. ‘I’d like you to meet Melinda.’ A small beaver-like creature jumped from the top bunk to the cell floor. Ben lunged back on his bed, kicking his out feet.

‘Jesus—what the . . . how the fuck you get that in here?’ Ben backed up as far as he could. His eyes stretched wide.

‘A few letters and phone calls; easy really. Melinda has gotten quite comfortable in the sink cupboard, but she adores lights out because then she gets to come out. I have everythin I need right here with me.’ Melinda looked at Ben staring in ghastly shock. The capybara opened its mouth to show off its incisor. Ben screamed a jangling, juttet sound that clambered through the prison.

‘Now be nice, Melinda. Ben hasn’t done anythin wrong.’



THE UNSEEN

William P. Robertson

They watch us from hazy sunshine
or the glimmers of an eerie moon.
Their footsteps whisper like bat wings;
their growls ripple from foggy woods.
Like the sudden intrusion of sleet,
they scare us with their presence.
They keep us on edge all evening,
embodied in whirlwinds of leaves.

“THE SQUEAL OF THE METAL GRINDING ON ITSELF
WAS WHAT MADE ME SCREAM AGAIN. IT CAME IN
CYCLES OF A LITTLE LESS THAN A SECOND AS YOU
TURNED THE SHAFT. ”

CRANK HARVEST

Raven McAllister

361,443. OH, I'M NEVER GOING AWAY. Never you think such a thing. *Never*. Just listen. Do you hear me? Do you hear me turn?

I was one of everyone staring out the window that day. My chubby face was just another prying background player on the austere stage, nose-hooked by a curiosity with no name to its beck and call. It seems this curiosity, this intrigue, emanated from the air itself, for there wasn't a precipitator to this event. Nothing provoked us. We came to the windows (second floor appeared to be favored) as if drawn forth by phantom puppet strings, and then we stood. And we stared. *I* stared, and here's what I saw.

John Colfax was standing at one of his back upstairs windows, too. His form was difficult to make out for the slate-blue suit I think he was wearing. It was strange to see him there, because this was a late Monday morning; Mr. Colfax should have been at work in the city. But there he stood, placid, blank-faced, his short peppered-grey hair neatly groomed and tie still straight. I had the feeling that he had gotten up for work, gotten dressed, then was called to the window. And he too stood. And waited.

The sky over his house was a crystalline blue. The birds

were crooning, the branches of the landscaped oaks were waving slightly, and the sun was near its apex. To my left, with some leaning and squinting, I could see a man in a black suit and silver tie walking through my backyard. He didn't acknowledge this fact in the least; nothing seemed to be on his mind other than a specific intent that came out in his steady gait. His hair was a darker silver than his tie, medium-length and worn brushed back. The man's hands were a dark red, and this observation pried my eyes open somehow wider. He walked to our white back fence, clambered over it rather gracefully, then headed toward Mr. Colfax's back door. It was you.

You looked like you didn't have a care in the world.

At this point Mom and Dad joined me. Mom took my left side, Dad my right. Neither asked me why I wasn't in school, though I had put on my dress skirt and vest before I came to the window planning on being there.

"A man just went through our backyard and into the Colfax's house," I pointed out to them. The only response I got was Dad's hand resting on my right shoulder.

Our eyes travelled just past Mr. Colfax's house, across the splendid spring day and into the far-off red-trimmed upstairs windows of the Wilson family's mint green painted lady. Mrs. Wilson was visible in the back right

window by her pink bathrobe. Her arm was around someone smaller, probably her youngest son Joshua. Another pair of faces was discernible in the window adjacent. No school for Josh and his sister, no work for Mr. Wilson—today was the day of the window, and the unnamed spectacle it had whispered vows of revealing to us in our slumber.

Mr. Colfax was no longer standing in his window. My family eyed his house until the back door opened again. Out you stepped with your red hands.

A mangy brown dog I had seen in the neighborhood for months before now approached you from the front of the house. It snarled at you, this out-of-place man in a suit; in turn, you produced something from inside your coat pocket. One end of the contraption looked like a rusty metal cone. On the other, flat end of it was a thin hand crank. As the mutt barked its threats, you pointed the cone toward the dog. You began to crank the object, which resulted in a shrill squeaking from its coarse and aged-sounding inner gears. This motion was calm and unaffected, positively unshaken by the dog.

And then the dog began to yelp. As the crank churned, the cone rotated. As the cone rotated, the dog began to vomit blood. Then its midsection began to bend. Its skin wrapped itself in a tight fold around the dog's ribs until, to the painful cries of the wretched animal, it began to rip. The dog was crippled by its body's distortion. Its entirety began to turn in a manner that seemed to almost violate gravity. The front paws started rotating upward as its back legs remained in contact with the grass. A series of wet cracking and popping noises accompanied this. I closed my eyes. There was one loud, prolonged crunch. When I dared to look again, I was met with what remained of the mutt: a pool of unraveled organs, wrought broken bones, and blood.

Still unphased in your dapper attire, you headed for the Wilsons' back door. You found it unlocked. You knew you would. An instinctual part of me—the part that use to jump at creeping shadows and creaking doors—wanted to cry out to Mrs. Wilson, to warn her, but logic immediately ruled out any scream from this distance being effective.

"Are our doors locked?" I asked my dad. He only squeezed my shoulder.

And then I witnessed the Wilsons withdrawing from their windows. One by one, they backed away, not even turning around. Mrs. Wilson was the first to back away and out of sight. Then the daughter, Mia, edged back. Then Mr. Wilson. Only Joshua, the last one left, turned

around at the window. His curly seven year-old head was cocked upward at something beyond my vision. Joshua grabbed his ribs. His knees buckled, and as he went down, his left hand came up and around into view. The way his head was facing when he collapsed...that hand shouldn't have been where it was. That hand was the last part of the Wilsons I saw, in fact, trembling in what was undoubtedly horrific torment as it descended down past the window pane.

You aren't human. I damn well know that. Humans stick cats in microwaves and babies in trash cans, but they don't do what you do.

When you came back out, red hands dangling carelessly at your sides, I knew you were on a dead march for our house. I described it to the police in those exact words before they hung up on me. You were like clockwork, and no silly variable like the cops or someone in their home with a gun dared to gum up your diabolic cogs. It was as if the path you walked—still walk—was rendered inert to reality. After it was over, no one would listen to what I had to say about you. No one would come see Mom and Dad's remains, and when I surprised them with my parents' remnants in tow in garbage bags, do you know what they did? They smiled and looked brain-dead. They all seemed to respond with an *I don't understand*. And that was fucking that.

I watched you reach our back door. You turned the knob. It opened. I turned around and threw up a little on the floor. I shrieked at my father. He did nothing. I kept shrieking.

Quieting for only a moment through panic and tears, I listened. I could hear you. Your footsteps never ceased. You never paused. It was as if you had lived with us for years. You knew exactly where to go. You knew precisely where we'd be.

"*Daddy! Please!*" I pleaded. Stamping and dancing with urgency around him, I pulled at him his arm, but he refused to even face away from the window. Your footsteps were falling at the top of the stairs.

"*DADDY!*"

But he didn't turn around. Even when you opened the door, neither he nor my mother moved a muscle. But my back wasn't to you; I faced you, I screamed at you, I demanded that you stayed away. You looked at me for the longest second of my life. I remember your eyes, and how they were an unblinking near-ebon brown. I recall your wrinkled face. It was long. It was stone. I remember feeling for just a hair of a moment that there really wasn't anything I or anyone else could do. Yours was a face that

had never seen denial. It was gaunt and cold. It was the face of a monster who harvested suffering.

Those red hands search the inside of your jacket. Out came the damnable thing. It was indeed rusty, only about a foot long. I braced myself against my father's side. And then you started to crank.

The squeal of the metal grinding on itself was what made me scream again. It came in cycles of a little less than a second as you turned the shaft. My eyes shut hard, my body clenched around my father. But when I felt a jolting pop from inside his arm, I let go, scared to touch him any longer. There was a wet, long tearing sound from his shoulder. He grimaced—that's how I know he was there, in some control of his mind. I sobbed his name again and again. The squealing crank sounded again and again, too. It won. When you were done rending my dad into shreds of blood-soaked skin, bone, and innards, you turned the thing on my mother. I wanted to stop you... But of course, you had fixed the rules so that I couldn't. My legs wouldn't obey me; they slumped down at my mother's side, and I was sprayed by her splitting exposed arteries.

And when it was over? You left. You didn't hesitate. I stood in choking sobs among what was left of my parents and listened to you leave. Your sure footfalls took you straight out of our home without any pause or thought. This part was over for you. Cheerio and so fucking long.

The days were so very long and empty after that. When you lose your parents in such a horrific manner, it's one thing. But when the world refuses to accept that fact or care in the least about it? It isn't right. In fact it may be the worst part of this all. There's only my vivid memory, and I'm the one person who wants that memory the least.

Yet, I need it. It's my only weapon.

I know I'm in your head now. I feel you cursing me inside. You're still doing what you do, going door to door without explanation or consequence, turning your crank, but I am there with you. These words are burned into your eyelids by now. I can imagine that you've considered even turning that device on yourself if not coming back for me, to violate your own contrived killing rules and put an end to this unrelenting psychological grind.

I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to keep writing this memory, word per word, verbatim, because I *know* you feel me now. It would take a rage like mine to find you and haunt you; maybe it's the only thing that can

force an uneven step in your brazen stride. The Catholic school girl you let live while she watched her family be mutilated around her isn't done with you. Not a chance. She's going to sit here, in the same darkened bedroom she's sat in for last nine years, and she's going to write. She's going to turn that crank.

But then, you've heard all this before. Haven't you, friend?

361,444. Just listen. Fucking *listen*. Do you hear me? Do you hear me turn?



FEVER



A young boy unlocks a 200-year-old curse upon the children of a small town in the Appalachian Mountains. The sins of the citizens of the town will once again become the downfall of the children. Rants of madness and fever begin to take hold. Can Tommy stop what he has opened or will the children suffer the same fate as they did 200 years before?

**A tale of revenge, witchcraft and terror from the mind of John Parker.
Artwork by David Magitis and Justin Braden.**

New from Post Mortem Comic Studios

www.postmortemcomics.com

“HE LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER, AND THE
FIGURE WAS NOW GETTING UP, AND HEADING FOR
THE SUV. GRIFFIN SHIFTED UP, GAINING SPEED,
LOOKING IN THE SIDE MIRROR.”

DRIVE

Sam Kepfield

WHEN YOU’VE GOT FOUR CUPS of coffee under your belt and in your bladder, the mile and odd yards from the green sign proclaiming REST STOP 1 MILE to the urinal takes on a life of its own. *I shoulda stopped at the truck stop a few miles back,* Paul Griffin thought grouchily. *But I’m so pressed for time in this damned weather that I let it go, and now I’m trying to keep from letting it go.*

He slowed and turned the Ford Aspire into the rest stop at Mile 265 on Interstate 70 East. He was a few miles east of Salina, Kansas and it was a few minutes past midnight and his eyeballs were turning yellow and his teeth were floating.

To take his mind off his bladder, he cursed the late start that had delayed him. A jury trial for two drug dealers busted a hundred or so miles west on this road turned into a three-day ordeal owing to the attorney for the other dealer. The guy charged ten grand just to look at a case, and obviously though he was getting paid by the word. A ten minute cross dragged on for three hours. Jury instructions, normally a half-hour procedure, took two hours. Both sides had rested and the jury had gone

out at ten to five, and the jury had decided to stay out until a verdict was reached, no breaks. The verdict came at quarter of ten. Guilty on all counts. Then he had to go to the jail and chat with his client for what turned out to be an hour, the guy just pissing and moaning about how it wasn’t fair the cops could charge him for this, he was just along for the ride, and yes he wanted to appeal the decision, how the fuck was a brother supposed to get anything but a raw deal from an all-white jury in this cracker county? Griffin patiently waited for the words to run out, said the right reassuring things, and left. He had been starving, but a quick stop at McDonald’s turned into a marathon when he got in behind a high school band bus. Another hour blown as the snow turned from a dusting to a blizzard. Motels in Salina were booked up, filled with people who had the luxury of time to rent a room for this night. He couldn’t sleep in the lobby, and wanted to get home. Home was in Topeka, two hours east of here in good weather, closer to two now, with Sandy nestled in their bed, blond and blue-eyed and naked under the covers. There *might* be a motel open in Junction City, twenty-five miles up ahead. He was

seriously considering parking the Ford, putting the seat down and sleeping here.

The rest stop was deserted, he saw, through the heavy snow. *Check that*, he thought, *almost deserted*. He saw a large black SUV parked diagonally in front of the stop. Exhaust was coming from the tailpipe; in this weather, it paid to idle and let the heater run. Griffin left the Ford running. Anyone out jacking cars tonight was going to be a few tacos short of a combo plate. Nothing valuable inside save for a briefcase and an overnight bag. He flicked the passenger door lock up, so as not to lock himself out (a habit born long ago), and hopped out of the car. He turned his collar up and held it together against the frigid Arctic wind roaring down from the Yukon. His steps were light, as he tried not to slip on the slippery snow. Five yards from the door, he had to grab his dick. Some unconscious signal had gone from his eyes to his brain to his bladder, which had tried to get an early start on things. *Don't let me piss my pants*, he groaned, shoving the door open. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that he was entering the women's room. It took a split second for him to decide that he was past caring where he went, another thirty seconds at most and he was going to piss his pants, and wouldn't *that* feel nice on this chilly night?

The harsh fluorescents glaring off beige tile and yellow cinderblock caused him to squint as he rounded the corner and headed towards the stalls. He dashed to the first stall, flung open the stall door, tore open the front of his coat, hastily undid his belt and yanked the front of his jeans open (*goddamned button fly 501s anyway*) and produced his member just in time, as the pressure reached critical mass, and a clear stream of urine shot out and splashed the wall and the chrome piping before he got it under control and directed it to the bowl. He leaned against the wall with his free hand, letting blessed relief wash over him.

It was then that he heard the noise. A gurgling, scratching noise. Not the sound of something leaving the body, surely. Griffin's sphincter tightened—thank God that wasn't in use at the moment—and he held his breath. *Say nothing, finish the job, walk quietly out of here, forget about washing the hands, and it never happened. See, lady, I'm not a pervert, I'm just a guy who had too much coffee to drink and didn't have the brains to stop ten miles ago and take a pee—*

It came again. Not vomiting, not dry heaves. It sounded like someone trying to talk. “H—h—h—h,” guttural and phlegmy. And, if he wasn't mistaken, two

stalls over.

The stream of urine slackened and reduced to a trickle as his bladder finally emptied. Shaking off, Griffin pushed the chrome handle and flushed. *Just walk outta here*, his mind told him, listening to the water rush down the pipes. A sucking sound, and then silence as the tank refilled.

And another gurgling, louder this time. Like they were trying to call him. He resisted. *Don't get involved, don't pay attention, just turn around and get the fuck out NOW, as he opened the stall door*. Reflexively he glanced down the row of stalls as he exited, and then wished for all the world that he hadn't.

The floor around the stool two stalls down was surrounded not by yellow, or Technicolor chunkiness.

It was awash in red. The thick, deep red of arterial blood.

Hypnotized, horrified, his mind protesting as his legs carried him nearer, Griffin inched towards the stall. His arm on autopilot and against his better instincts—*just leave nobody is going to know you were here don't get involved whatever you do*—pushed the stall door open and he stood squarely in front of it and saw—

A woman sat on the porcelain stool, clad in blue jeans and a winter coat, tennis shoes on her feet. Young, no more than twenty-five, fair complexion and light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, face between plain and pretty, nose a bit too big, chin a little weak. Her brown eyes looked up at him, blankly he thought at first but then pleading, her mouth opened in an O. Blood trickled out of both sides of her mouth, but not enough to cause the pool on the filthy tiles.

She had been stabbed. Repeatedly. Viciously. Her shirt—it was impossible to tell what color it had been but it was now red—was torn open. Two cups of a brassiere hung, the thin band of connecting fabric cut by a knife showing the hint of small white breasts. Griffin counted a half dozen wounds, then eight, then he quit counting, wounds in her abdomen, some mere vagina-like slits, a couple gaping, where the knife had gone in and twisted. The walls of the stall were splattered with blood that had spurted from her body, was still spurting as he came up her. One burst landed on the leg of his jeans, and he jumped back.

She tried raising one arm, and it fell limply back to her side. “H—h—h—” she repeated, tongue almost out of her mouth, blood bubbling on her lips, eyes now imploring him to *help her, do something, anything, sew up the wounds, stop the bleeding, repair the sliced liver and*

intestines and the pierced lungs and heart.

Griffin stood there, frozen, dumbly unmoving, the sight and situation so utterly unexpected that his brain had shut down in order to process, like rebooting. System Error, Current Drive Not Selected, Please Press A Key And Try Again. He'd been driving highways for twenty-five years, been in a few dozen states and hundreds of rest stops but had never remotely encountered anything like this. He'd once come upon a couple—homosexual—shut in a stall with various wet sounds emanating one time, but that was it.

A last gurgle, more bubbles frothing from her lips, and the body went ever more slack, the eyes unfocused as the spark left them, a misty gray sheen beginning to form. *Dead already and didn't even fucking know it.*

He was rooted to the spot, a dozen thoughts going through his head, different options and scenarios. *Leave? Stay? Call 911 on the payphone? Keep quiet? Look for ID? Look for—*

Look for the (his mind had to wrap itself around the term, now that it was so up close and intimate) killer?

Who was, it dawned on him, most likely within a few yards. The blood was fresh, still running out of her wounds, though the spurting had stopped with her heartbeat. *The SUV parked out front, still running, this couldn't have happened more than a couple of minutes ago, what are the odds that at midnight someone gets killed in the women's room and there's a car outside and a guy in the men's pisser who doesn't see it? Slim and none, old pal.* Griffin bent over, looking under the other stalls, half-expecting to see a pair of legs standing one over and a hulking psycho with a chainsaw and hockey mask jump out at him. But they were empty.

Griffin jerked back up, looking at the woman again, and in a split second his mind crystallized. There wasn't anything he could do for her—hell, hadn't been even while she was breathing her last. The only thing he could do was get the tag number of the SUV, forget about a description, get out and get to a phone.

A phone. There was a pay phone out front, and the next one was ten miles up. His own cell phone sat useless in the car, the charge having run out sometime that afternoon, and the charger was back in his office.

Like moving through mud or deep snow, his legs began working, taking him backwards through the bathroom. His back hit the door, pushing it open, and he craned his neck to get one last look at the horrific scene. He whirled around and began walking to his car, tiptoeing so as not to slip on the snow, the car was only twenty yards in

front of him, lights on, warm inside, ready to take him away from this nightmare . . .

A thump and door moving on hinges, Griffin glanced to his right, and saw a man emerging from the men's room. Clad in a long, dark coat, he carried something in a towel in his right hand, visible in the orange sodium light vapor illuminating the rest stop. Griffin slowed, then stopped, just as the man—it was a man, clearly, with strong jaw and shaved head and tattoos visible on the neck beneath ears—caught sight of Griffin and halted. For a moment their eyes met through the driving snow. The other's eyes were light, icy, filled with dark purpose that was not yet finished.

Griffin paused, and then broke into a run. *Dumb, dumb, now he knows that you saw something.* Griffin lost his footing and went down on the pavement, his hand scraping on ice and then concrete, his knee hitting hard. Gasping, he stood, pain shooting through his knee, looked over his shoulder and the man was running now, the towel off what was a long knife, not a Swiss Army knife but a big fucking Rambo knife, a military-surplus Ka-Bar painted dull black with a serrated edge, just perfect to fillet a human being like a rainbow trout.

Griffin slid around his car, grabbed the door handle, threw open the door and jumped into the driver's seat, put the car in reverse just as the man reached him. He reached up and locked the door as he floored the accelerator, leaving the other grabbing at air and slipping. He braked, feeling the car slide, shifted into first, and felt the tires grab briefly. Fighting the urge to floor it, since he'd just spin his wheels, Griffin eased on the gas and the car moved along the access road, towards the interstate. He looked over his shoulder, and the figure was now getting up, and heading for the SUV. Griffin shifted up, gaining speed, looking in the side mirror. Nothing. The interstate wouldn't be too busy at this hour even in good weather. At one a.m., though, with winter weather advisories and every radio and TV station in the state telling people to stay home unless absolutely necessary, it was almost deserted.

For all his road time, Griffin invented a little game he played, while listening to the radio. Each car or truck was a story he concocted in his mind to pass the time. The young college couple meeting each other's parents for the first time. The elderly couple going to visit grandchildren. The mother driving children to a gymnastics meet. *Just my luck I get the car with the slasher flick for a story.*

In the rear view mirror, he could see the black SUV merge onto the interstate. *Shit*, Griffin thought. *This isn't*

happening, this is a bad movie script, crazed killer knocking off accidental witness. Of course, the movies treated the incidental unplanned victims as meat, not as living, breathing human beings with wives and children and careers and hopes and dreams and loved ones to mourn . . . *I'm real, and this guy wants to kill me. For real. I'm the meat..*

The SUV gained at an alarming rate, moving faster than Griffin would have thought safe or possible in this weather. Before he could goose the accelerator, there was a *thunk!* A striking, crunching noise and the Ford lurched ahead alarmingly. Griffin's heart sped up as his brain slowed down. The Ford skidded, and adrenaline-fueled reflexes took over. He let his foot off the gas, corrected as the car began fishtailing, heading for the right lane. He steered it between two cones, and straightened the Ford. There was not, fortunately, any real road work here but it hadn't been plowed or traveled, and he wasn't about to stay on the snow more than he had to. He looked in the rear view mirror, saw the SUV behind him, brights on. As he watched, it moved into the right lane, plowing over two cones—*does he really think I'm going to stop here on the shoulder and talk about this in subzero weather?* Griffin slowed the Ford down to thirty, downshifted to second, hearing the RPMs go up and the engine rev, and he carefully steered the Aspire between two cones and was back in the left lane. He shifted, brought the speed back up to 50, and let his heart slow down.

The Escalade again bore down on the rear hatch of his Ford, maybe a car length behind him—*way too close, one car length for each 10 m.p.h, so you're about four too short, add a few more for weather.* Through the windshield, he could dimly see the driver, who seemed to be pounding on the steering wheel, imagined a face twisted in hate—no, make that determination, as a lynx hunts down a jackrabbit, and Griffin was the prey.

Twenty years of criminal behavior rushed back at him. *The teenager charged with murder because another kid wearing the wrong color coat had dissed him, his voice bearing not a single word of remorse or regret, a brave façade when was sent to prison for fifty years. The store clerk accused of raping his eleven year old daughter, in calm tones rationalizing it by detailing the provocative clothes she wore around the house, surprised when it was suggested that maybe she really wasn't coming on to him after all. The middle-aged factory worker who broke into his wife's apartment after she filed for divorce, beat and raped her, told the judge and prosecutor at his first court appearance that she was "my bitch and my problem," defiant up to the*

moment he was sent to prison for over sixty years, effectively a life sentence. Dozens of others, and not a damned one of them really believed that they had done wrong.

That mentality was what sat behind the wheel of the Escalade which, Griffin saw, was now gaining on him. The woman had been—what, a witness to another crime, the owner of the carjacked SUV, a kidnapping and ransom victim, a random rape victim? It didn't matter. Griffin was now just an object, a problem to be solved.

The Escalade was now a couple of car lengths behind the Aspire, and Paul gave it a little more gas, wincing as the tires skidded ever so slightly on the snow. The speedometer stood at 55, The Limit back in Nixon's day, but not nearly enough now. Christ, if this had been a clear day, and he'd had the Mustang, this wouldn't be a problem.

A green sign hove into view. EXIT 275 ABILENE 1 MILE. A sign for the Eisenhower Library flashed by. Forty thousand souls just a mile away, surely someone would help him—

Right. If the Escalade didn't catch him first, ram him into a phone pole or street light, and Christ only knew what else was in the SUV behind him. *9mm on the passenger seat? Shotgun in the back seat? Mac 10 on the floorboard?* Any of which would dispatch him quite nicely. The police and sheriff were located at the other end of town, meaning a couple of miles down the main drag, endangering anyone else on the road. Any cop coming upon the Escalade, pulling it over, was facing certain death, and Griffin wasn't going to have that on his conscience, letting another die to save his own skin.

As he watched Abilene pass by on his right, the main street visible and empty from the overpass, Griffin wondered how this could be happening, in the twenty-first century, on a major interstate highway. So where were the goddamned cops, anyway?

What was up ahead? Two small towns, Chapman and Enterprise, both sleepy little burgs that would be buttoned down tight this evening, patrolled only by a small police forces equipped to deal with drunk drivers and speeding tickets. After that, Junction City, a good-size town, but the same problem with Abilene, police station off the highway by a good few miles. After that—*Fort Riley, home of the Big Red One, that was it, there was a main gate off the interstate and another on K-18 which turned off I-70, leading right to a major military installation filled with men who were trained to deal with wackos like this, there would be armed guards posted at the gates, just get there a few seconds earlier than the Escalade,*

jump out shout a warning—and hope he didn't get shot first. A calculated risk he had to take. The Fort it was, for now, a half-baked plan to be sure, but better than anything else he could come up with.

A few miles more, and the cars held their positions as the weather turned worse, a few places the snow so heavy that visibility extended a few yards past the hood of his car. He looked back, the Escalade was holding, driving safely in the conditions. Makes sense—if he goes off into a ditch, I get away, tell the cops and they're here in a minute while he's spinning his wheels trying to get out. It was the old joke—*guy gets a flat tire in front of a mental hospital, gets the tire off and loses the bolts, voice comes from the hospital, says try taking one bolt from the other wheels, that should get you to a service station, guy says thanks, how did you figure that out, the voice says, I'm in here for being crazy, not stupid.* Mr. Psycho Killer back there might be suffering from a real doozy of a personality disorder, but he wasn't dumb.

Griffin passed EXIT 281 ENTERPRISE K-43. His heart was hammering, breath coming shallow. I can't keep this up for another twenty miles, he thought. He'd been through college, law school, a bar exam, and God knew how many jury trials, but the past half hour was by far the most excruciating of his life. He prayed it wouldn't be the last half hour.

The snow lightened up a couple of miles past the exit. The Escalade began closing, now moving into the center of the two lanes, and holding there. *Uh-oh*, Griffin thought, remembering a move he'd seen on one of those reality shows, *World's Wildest Police Chases*? Or had it been *Cops*? He couldn't remember, but it was used to stop chases. The police cruiser would hit the suspect's vehicle from behind, on a corner, and send it skidding out of control, send it crashing into another car, a curb, a lamppost, or fence, and the shirtless perp would immediately burst from the car and sprint for freedom, but always get surrounded by six large pissed-off cops, tasered and handcuffed, all caught from overhead by an ActionNews helicopter. Easy on sunny dry Southern California streets, almost too easy on a snowy Kansas interstate.

Griffin looked in the rear view mirror as the Escalade dropped back a few car lengths—to pick up ramming speed, he knew—and then began closing again. Just before it hit, Griffin pulled the wheel to the right, closed his eyes and prayed, stifling a shout or scream as he felt the Aspire hit the unplowed snow on the shoulder, pull to the right and slow. He let off the gas and heard a *whoosh*

as the Escalade sped past. The brake lights came on as it passed the Aspire's nose, and it moved over into the right lane, and over onto the shoulder.

Gonna try and bulldog me, Griffin thought. *Slow down, not let me by, bring us to a stop, and then out comes the Rambo knife, or Louisville Slugger, or tire iron.* The Escalade braked harder; Griffin also braked, but not enough. The front of the small Ford hit the rear bumper with a sickening crunch, and bounced back.

Fuck fuck fuck, Griffin swore, hitting the brakes and feeling the Aspire disengage from the Escalade with another shriek of protesting, torn metal. The exit ramp EXIT 286 CHAPMAN K-220 (a 220 centered in a yellow sunflower) appeared out from behind the Escalade, and without even thinking, Griffin turned the wheel and the Aspire whizzed down the ramp, stifling a scream as he felt it slide to towards the ditch and his certain death bleeding his veins dry in a snowy ditch, daintily turning the wheel and bringing it out of the slide. He began braking, not too hard—no anti-lock brakes on a subcompact that had cost all of \$8995 brand new back in '94—downshifting as the RPMs lowered. At the foot of the ramp he was doing 10 MPH. His head darted from one side to the other—no traffic on the highway, thank God. He slid to a stop in the middle of the intersection.

Now what? Run to town? No good, he'd already thought that one out. He didn't need small-town cops, he needed the Marines. Or the Army, twenty miles up ahead. There was a Kansas Highway Patrol barracks thirty miles back in Salina; the next one was up ahead in Junction City, if he lived that long. No, for now he needed to get back on the road, ahead of the Escalade.

He got out quickly, shivering at the cold cutting through his flimsy oxford, the wind freezing his ears almost instantly. The damage to the Ford was considerable—one headlight smashed and gone, the other at a cockeyed angle, plastic bits of bumper and grille hanging at awkward angles, the hood caved in. He looked under the front of the car—amazingly, the radiator had held.

He heard a roaring sound coming down the on-ramp. The Escalade was making a U-turn and heading towards him. Crazy. Definitely crazy. *He doesn't want to run me off the road, disable me. He means to kill me, and all because I was too stupid to take a piss at the goddamned truck stop ten miles earlier.* Griffin hurried back into the Aspire. He wasn't going to be able to get back on by taking the on-ramp. Well, take the west-bound off-ramp up? And get into the right lane how? No good choices, the Escalade at the top of the on-ramp, coming down at him, he

put the Aspire in gear, turned the wheel hard left, and fishtailed onto the two-lane highway. At the on/off ramp interchange for the westbound lane, he turned left, which meant he was headed up the on-ramp for the westbound lane of I-70. *He wants to follow me, fine, I can use that, I'm gonna get in the right lane, it's just gonna take longer.* The 4-cylinder engine revved, as he ascended the on-ramp. He craned his neck as he reached the top, hit the brakes. No traffic coming his way, sure, no one would be crazy enough to be out in this weather, would they? He cut the wheel sharply to the left, now heading the wrong way. He glimpsed the Escalade at the foot of the ramp, all four wheels throwing up snow as it chased him. He crossed the overpass, braked, cut the wheel again hard left, just as the Escalade hit I-70. Down the west-bound off-ramp, brake again, another hard left, onto the two-lane blacktop, sprint to the eastbound on-ramp, left, and then upward, hoping that it was going to work—

Not quite. Crazy, but not stupid, the Escalade hadn't completely fallen for his trick, and it was in the bound lane of the interstate, a gully dug in the snow in the median, and just past the eastbound off-ramp, coming up on him quick.

Griffin gunned the accelerator, the front tires spinning and then catching, shifting up, keeping an eye on the SUV as it picked up speed and bore down on him. Griffin gave the Ford more gas, and it crested the on-ramp and got into the merge lane just ahead of the Escalade. He shifted into fifth gear, and gained a few precious yards on his pursuer.

"Ha Ha!" Griffin shouted triumphantly. "Take that, motherfucker!" The elation, though, was cut short by a realization. *I can't outrun this guy.* The thought came was sudden, with a clarity that matched the icy weather. *He's clearly crazy, won't give up—shit, he pulled a knife on me. I can't run him off the road, into the ditch, 'cause he's got my tag number memorized by now, for sure, and knows that I'm from Riley County, no trick to go to the courthouse and get the information. And then it's looking over my shoulder forever, waiting for this maniac to jump out at me—or at Sandy.*

No—Griffin shook his head. Keep to the task at hand.

The thought crystallized in his mind. *This fucker absolutely has to die. And I have to do it.*

He was shocked at himself. Saying "I'll kill you" to kids, spouse, or co-workers, was a figure of speech. It wasn't a plan, something sketched out in the mind for use at the appropriate time. Hell, he wasn't even violent. The last

fight he'd been in was thirty years ago, in high school, where he'd finally gotten fed up with the taunts from Derek Bonner, an upperclassman who kept dumping his books, making lewd remarks about his mother, and following him home shouting insults. Paul had finally turned around in the hallway, dropped his books on the linoleum floor, and threw a haymaker in Bonner's face, and then brought a booted foot up into his balls. Bonner grabbed his nose, which was spurting blood, and drew in a deep breath as his balls erupted in agony, went down like a poleaxed steer, and puked on the floor. It had been satisfying, but also carried a price, two months in a plaster cast. Bonner's face wasn't Silly Putty, it was bone. And it hurt like hell. Lesson learned, and for the next three decades, Paul Griffin did what all middle and upper class respectable people do, he buried his anger inside to vent in socially approved fashion. Not like the white trash who constantly got hauled in on drunk and disorderly or wife-beating and provided him a steady income. Paul's sort of people Just Didn't Do That.

Okay, okay, think think think. How to off a homicidal maniac, not stupid, in a larger and faster vehicle on a road that is absolutely straight and flat. He remembered that old Spielberg movie with Dennis Weaver, *Duel*. Salesman gets chased by an unseen psycho in a Peterbilt along a desert highway. Dennis Weaver drove an old Plymouth that kept overheating. The movie ended after two hours with Weaver finally tricking the trucker into going over a cliff.

No such luck here. The Aspire wasn't going to boil over. He wasn't going to get anywhere near the speed limit. No steep cliffs to push the Escalade over. There were the occasional creeks and streams, but that wasn't going to do it. And God Bless the good old Kansas Department of Transportation and the National Highway Safety Administration for adopting regulations on placement of guardrails on all bridges and overpasses, built to take a semi collision and survive. An Escalade would bounce off with a few dents and paint scrapes, and come right back at him.

Overpasses. There was something there; Paul spied one a mile up ahead, as the big SUV surged ahead to give the Ford another jolt from the rear, but Griffin hit the gas just in time. The speedometer hovered at 60, way too fast for the weather, *he's waiting for me to slide off the road first, then move in for the kill—that's it, scumbag, you are dead dead DEAD as soon as I figure out how to pull it off. No trial, no one's gonna tearfully plead your case to a jury, weep over a bad childhood and give you ten years instead of*

the noose. He eyed the overpass, and the guardrails. Four lanes, two each split by big round concrete supports, maybe six, eight feet in diameter. The guardrails began ahead of the pillars, about a hundred feet or so, the end point near the middle of the median, the end point brushing up against the pillar and extending for another fifty feet beyond. From this direction, it would, at worst, scrape the paint job on the Escalade. But from the other direction—

From the other direction, it would be like running a pinball right up the groove, under the little gate, into the big tunnel and TILT the machine. Push the Escalade right into the slot—

Which would require him getting over in the other lane, through maybe a foot of snow, most likely more. He'd high-center the damned Ford, and then Mr. Psycho Killer—*qu'est que c'est fa fa fa fa fa fa fa far better run run run run away* David Byrne sang in his head—would hop out and gleefully gut him.

At intervals along the interstate, there were upraised dirt trails cutting across the medians from one lane to another, favored by Highway Patrol vehicles for surveillance. Then there were long concrete strips between the lanes, left over from road construction. Hit one of those just right, gun it, and he'd be right across, heading straight into oncoming traffic. The crossroads were usually a short distance before the overpasses, so he'd have to keep his eyes out.

EXIT 290 MILFORD LAKE 2 MILES, the big green rectangle read. *Two miles to go, two miles to off this bastard or get offed trying.* Griffin remembered some road work a couple years ago, one entire lane torn up, and he was certain that there was a good long length of pavement between the lanes at this exit. Paul Griffin realized the enormity of what he was going to do, the sheer danger of it, and he began hyperventilating, fogging the windshield. He hit the AC, pushed the heater lever over to hit the windshield, and the fog cleared up.

Okay, this is it, he told himself. He slowed down, letting the big black beast grow in his rear view mirror. He found the cross-road, braked and downshifted, held his breath, heart hammering in his chest, and shouted as the Aspire glided across with amazingly little effort. Griffin rolled down the window, stuck his arm out, extended the middle finger—*gotta make this guy mad, crazier than he already is, make him fixate on the finger and not what I'm about to do.* He put his head out and shouted "Catch me, you dumb-ass piece of shit!" before guiding the Aspire onto the eastbound lane, staying on

the shoulder to let a surprised pickup truck and a Chrysler Sebring pass him by. He stabilized the car in the right lane and frantically rolled up the window, shivering from the Artic blast he'd let in, and saw the Escalade closing rapidly in his lane. Fifty yards, thirty, twenty. . . Griffin cut the wheel to the left and braked. The Aspire swerved sickeningly, and Griffin fought to repress a scream and then hysterical giggling born of terror, but then the tires caught and held. The Escalade came aside rapidly, just as the overpass approached.

With one big pull, he cranked the steering wheel to the right, the small car ramming the big SUV, and for a moment he thought it wouldn't work—*a mouse pushing an elephant, how could I have thought it would work?*—he gave the car more gas, jerked on the wheel harder, and suddenly, the Escalade began dropping towards the median, brake lights flashing, but the tires kicking up snow as they sought purchase on the slick, snow-covered pavement and then grass, the last look he had at the driver was frantically trying to steer it away from the onrushing disaster, mouth open in a scream or shout, arms flying up to cover his face. Griffin began braking, and looked over his shoulder just in time to see the Escalade shoot down between the guardrails, not even touching them, straight towards the huge concrete pillar, and out of the corner of his eye saw it go from sixty to zero in nothing flat in a shower of broken glass and flying plastic and twisting metal.

Griffin downshifted, bringing the Aspire to a halt on the shoulder. He put the gearshift in neutral, pulled the emergency brake, and sat there for a moment, heart thudding, breath shallow, sweat pouring down his face, and began laughing again in release. It was humorless laughter, a statement that he was alive, had survived and had managed to keep from pissing in his pants in the bargain.

He got out, grabbed his heavy coat from the rear seat, and threw it on. He gave the Aspire a walk-around. It was totaled, or near enough so. The front end was a mess, the sides were dented and paint scraped off, two hubcaps missing, half of the rear bumper gone, the hatchback sitting at an odd angle. Smoke puffed out of the bent tailpipe.

He walked over to the wreck of the Escalade, pulling his collar up to guard against the cold. The SUV had hit at almost full speed, the tires not finding any traction on the snow. The front end was pushed halfway to the passenger compartment in at a V-angle. Shards of plastic and glass littered the snow in front of the Escalade. Fluids

leaked from the engine compartment, the sickly green of antifreeze and the darkness of a spreading oil stain merging into a toxic mess. He stopped about twenty feet from the vehicle, looking through a shattered driver's window. The windshield directly in front of the steering wheel spiderwebbed, the inside of the glass coated in red and—*dear God*—pinkish-gray. He walked closer, transfixed, his feet moving independent of his brain. A body sat in the driver's seat, erect, but the face was unrecognizable as human, resembled raw hamburger more than anything else. The head lolled, and through the torn, stringy redness two white orbs opened, a mouth filled with broken teeth yawned, a strangled sound escaping before the eyes went blank.

"I win," was all Griffin could say, and the words choked off as he said them, as he caught sight of something in the snow that had fallen from or been ejected from the Escalade in the collision, something lying half-covered by the snow.

It was a teddy bear.

There was no sound from the Escalade, save for the hissing of the radiator.

As the state trooper who showed up fifteen minutes later (allowing Griffin time to vomit against the concrete bridge support) explained it, the driver was a three-time loser, an ex-con who was facing around thirty years in prison on drug charges—Griffin had been right about that much. The dead woman in the rest stop was his ex-girlfriend, whose SUV he had taken. The three-year old girl in the back seat of the Escalade was their daughter. DeWayne Ross had decided to jump bond and take his daughter with him. The touching display of paternal feeling was ruined by the mother, whom Ross then abducted at knifepoint from her home in Hays. She had apparently fought him the entire way, and Griffin imagined that he had finally reached his breaking point at the rest stop on Mile 262, taken her into the women's room and murdered her.

Ross died on impact, suddenly and messily. His daughter was also DOA. Car seat unbuckled, neck broken.

Rationalize it. That's all he could do, to face the horror of it all. Blame the damned judge who'd set the bond ridiculously low—not once, but three damned times on three separate cases—for such a violent offender, allowing to waltz out of the county jail and into his ex's home. It was Ross' own fault, doing something that stupid with a child in the back seat. Or the ex's fault, getting hooked up with a bum like Ross in the first place, and then

fighting him and getting herself killed at a fucking rest stop at the same time he needed to relieve himself. That helped a little. He tried to lessen the loss. The kid would have died anyway, certainly someone like Ross would have killed her or beaten her severely in no time flat. He would have been caught, the child taken and placed in foster care to grow up angry and alienated and turning to drugs and alcohol and prostitution to support a habit, finally ending her life at age thirty in a dirty room on a urine-soaked mattress with a needle in her arm. Or she would have turned to crime, genes being what they are, and ended her life in and out of prison, talent and beauty and a life all wasted. Griffin tried it all, and it got close, but self-absolution was always just a finger's length out of reach, ever elusive. Acceptance, a poor substitute, finally came, permitting him some measure of peace in the early hours of the morning when the soul is laid bare and the monsters of the id come out.

And he always detoured around that stretch of road, the better to ignore the small marker he'd placed there a month later.



“WHAT LOOKS LIKE A PLUME OF BREATH MADE
VISIBLE BY COLD CURLS AROUND THE CORNERS OF
THE SUBJECT’S MOUTH BEFORE BEING SUCKED INTO
THE HUNGRY LIPS OF THE SPECTRAL SEDUCTRESS.”

THE WINTER EXPERIMENT

William Todd Rose

MY DEAD UNCLE’S MOUNTAIN TOP CABIN, day eight of my seventeenth experiment, one hundred and seventy hours that my subject has been shackled to the wall. All of the ancient rites have been performed, the proper incense burned, the instruments calibrated, and now I sit, watching and waiting. I have modified the cabin, divided the single large room into two smaller ones: the one I am in has the comfort of a wood burning stove, an overstuffed office chair, and a large two-way mirror installed in the dividing wall; the other room, the test chamber, where my subject has given up screaming for help and is now pulling at her chains as if she could somehow muster the strength to rip them from the wall is as cold and barren as the tundra outside.

The subject is unaware of the sensors surrounding her, unaware of the place she is taking in the annals of metaphysical science. She probably feels alone, afraid, only aware that she has been taken away from everything she has ever known or loved, held captive and questioned for reasons she can not begin to comprehend . . . how could she even begin to understand how important I have made her, the impact her sacrifice will have upon

the world if my hypothesis proves correct? I have taken this simple shop girl and elevated her into greatness, into the immortality that comes with the making of history.

Everything is in order. The door to the cabin faces the northeast, the direction the elders used to call the kimon, the Demon Gate, the bridge between the human world and that of the oni, the yokai, the yurei . . .

My electronics begin to flux wildly between extremes, room temperature dipping lower, lower still, then rapidly rising almost to freezing point before plummeting back down into subzero readings, electromagnetic fields wavering far above and below normal, the stylus scratching out a jagged scribble like the EKG reading of a seizure patient.

The door flies open and bangs against the wall with such force that the pane of glass in the two-way mirror rattles. Snow swirls in the air and scatters into the cabin like tiny creatures fleeing the approach of some ravenous predator and then I see her, the fruition of all my research and experimentation, the end result of countless hours huddled over the pages of forgotten tomes, of melding enduring mythology with empirical method, manifesting in the doorway and stirring forbidden emotion from this

stoic scientist.

Horror and lust, wanting so badly to reach out and touch but fearing the searing cold that would surely shatter my fingers into a thousand crystalline pieces with even the slightest brush. So beautiful and deadly like a silver-eyed serpent weaving before me, begging me to drown in those mercury like pools, to see my reflection, to see the images playing out of me taking her, out there in the snow dunes: all primal passion, grunts and moans as she writhes beneath me, leaning closer, ever closer, her lips glistening and parted for that one final kiss, her mouth oh so inviting and ready to wrap my soul in her soft, secret places.

Those luscious lips move, as if speaking, but the voice seems to originate somewhere within my head, as if the bones of my skull are vibrating like the surface of a speaker and projecting the soft, lilting voice directly into my brain:

Come to me, lover, come to my palace of ice, come to my frozen caverns of inequity, come to me . . .

Look away, look at anything, at the instrumentation, the needles and gauges charting every environmental variable of the room, the camera recording each frame of this once-in-a-lifetime encounter. Stare at the clipboard, at your notes, at the smudge of dirt on the tip of your shoe. Watch the subject instead, how she has ceased to struggle against her restraints, limp and subservient now like a flesh doll cast off into the corner of the cabin: discarded and forgotten by the world of mortals, but a perfect plaything for the woman who came out of the cold.

Yuki-onna, the snow woman, yokai, myth, legend, the subject of a thousand nightmares and fantasies finally here before me. Her naked flesh as white and pure as the snow from which she emerged, her silken black hair cascading to the small of her back, lips as soft and red as rose petals blown by the breeze onto a snow drift. I want to run my hand along the smooth curves of her hips, to trace patterns onto her belly with the tip of my tongue, to go to her on bent knees and allow her to cup my face between her hands as she leans ever closer.

Yes, lover, come. Come to me, see what delights I have in store for you . . .

The subject gasps from her corner, really nothing more than a soft sigh but enough to sever the spell. I find that I have crossed half the room, that I am now just on the other side of the two-way mirror with my hand poised on the door knob and ready to turn. Ready to join her. Prepared to become a part of my own experiment.

Jerking my hand away as if the knob were a spider and I a fat, juicy bug. Look instead at the cabin's front door: see how Yuki-onna left no tracks in the snow, listen to the wind howling like a wounded beast, and notice that it does not seem to cause her hair to whip around in its frenzy. So cold outside, but not a dimple on her bare, porcelain-like skin, not a shiver or even the slightest indication that she feels the freezing temperatures of the storm.

She moves to the subject now, almost seeming to glide across the wooden floor. I try to look at her feet, to see if steps are actually being taken, but can not focus. I see the vaguest suggestion of toes and heel but it's almost as if I were looking through a mist, as if they are struggling to take form in this world of flesh and sinew, wavering in the borderlands between shadow and substance. I feel the stain of madness seeping around the edges of my mind, want to cry and scream and laugh and touch . . . oh god how I want to touch, what would it be like to slide my finger into that fuzzy patch of reality, to have it span the gap between worlds? Would I feel feet or perhaps the strange sensation of existing simultaneously in two separate planes of existence, one of which was never meant to know the presence of the human form?

Touch me, lover, take me in your hands, embrace me with your curiosity, come with me, come now . . .

No, ignore her words, focus on the subject, remember your purpose, observe, record, remain objective: Subject 17 is a twenty-four year old female, healthy, no history of mental illness, no professed beliefs in the supernatural, more resilient to environmental extremes than previous subjects. Slight bruising on the upper right shoulder, two pinpoint burns on the left side of the neck at taser contact point, now appears to be in a catatonic or hypnagogic state, has not reacted to the presence of the yokai Yuki-onna since shortly after manifestation at 0200 hours. The yokai herself is like something from a fevered dream, alluring and beautiful, seeming to radiate an aura of sensuality in every graceful move of her arm, every slight turn of the head, the rhythmic rise and fall of her perfect breasts is like . . .

So strong, her seduction of the mind: who is manacled more, Subject 17? Or I to the allure of her temptations?

Yuki-onna leans over the subject, so close that surely the girl must sense on some level the presence of such a powerful force. If so, she gives no indication as the yokai pinches the girl's cheeks, forming the mouth into a slight oval. Time seems to slow to a near standstill as Yuki-onna's lips touch those of the subjects, the slight

hint of pink tongue entering the mouth. Crystals start to spread across the surface of the subject's eyes, like time-lapse footage of a puddle icing over, and Yuki-onna clutches the subject's hair in her fists, pushing the girl's head forward, kissing more deeply.

What looks like a plume of breath made visible by cold curls around the corners of the subject's mouth before being sucked into the hungry lips of the spectral seductress. Skin tinged blue now, ice forming on eyelashes, suddenly the subject is struggling again, kicking her heels against the floor, thrashing, the manacles clinking as loud as bells in the silence of the scene playing out. But there is no escape. She is captive within Yuki-onna's embrace, held so tightly against the naked flesh that surely the two will merge into a single entity if those alabaster arms increase their pressure even slightly.

I could know the taste of those lips, know the feeling of those breasts pressed against my chest, the tickle of her hair brushing against my nipples, the cold, cold comfort of her arms.

Come, Lover . . .

The subject no longer struggles, her limbs are locked in their final positions, a single frozen tear half trickled out of the corner of her eye, and her body covered in a layer of frost like a sculptor's interpretation of fear on a cold winter's morn. Yuki-onna pulls away from her, stands fully upright, turns, and looks at the mirror, looks through the mirror, looks into the deepest recesses of my psyche.

Come . . .

I am her servant, her toy, her willing slave, no longer having the strength to resist her summons. My body, my spirit, my life all offered up upon the altar of carnal hunger. I raise my arms to welcome her approach.

From behind Yuki-onna I hear a sharp popping like the sound of a frozen lake shattering into spider web cracks underfoot. I see chains that were once securely fastened to the wall, now seeming as if they had been dipped into liquid nitrogen and tapped with a hammer, fractured and laying in slivers on the floor.

The subject stands, her movements rigid and jerky, the film of ice across her body breaking where joints coax movement from stiffened muscle. She moves in front of the yokai, obscuring the object of my wanton desire from view. Something forms in the subject's hands, something long and slender and glistening, something like a cross between an icicle and a metallic spike, looking so much sharper and deadlier than any weapon ever crafted by human hands and gaining solidity with each passing

second.

I see Yuki-onna's hand appear on the subject's shoulder, the touch light, familiar, intimate.

Lover.

The subject steps toward the door to the room I am in, slashing at the air in front of her with Yuki-onna's deadly gift as if testing it. Her frosted lips part ever so slightly and her voice is a hoarse whisper.

"You will never have her."

The door creaks open.

Funny, how snowdrifts dampen the sound of screams in the night.



“THE FIRE IS BOUNCING AND ITS GLOW OPENING
UP TO FORM THE JAWS OF A GREAT BLACK HOLE,
A TUNNEL WHICH LICKS ITS LIPS AND SNAPS ITS
TEETH, AND RISES FROM THE PUDDLE OF STEAMING
TEARS THAT COLLECTS AT ADRIAN’S FEET.”

CRY HOLES

Michelle Howarth

ADRIAN IS PERCHED on the park bench, legs swinging, arms folded. The other boy sits in the woodchips and cries. He has fallen off the swing, which rattles back and forth minus its passenger, who holds his scuffed knee in both hands.

“He shouldn’t do that,” Adrian says, shakes his head, and pouts his lips.

Liza, who is with him now—the shape that tucks him in at night, the one who feeds him, sings to him, and guides him when they cross the street—asks, “What?”

“Cry,” Adrian points out. “He shouldn’t cry.”

Liza looks at the boy in the woodchips. He sobs louder as a woman comes to wrap her arms around him. “It’s okay, he hurt his knee.”

“Doesn’t matter. Mummy says you should never do that. Not ever.”

Familiar lines wrinkle Liza’s face. Her eyes grow extra big. Her lips press tight, then blow out a puff of air. “Your mummy’s not here now,” she says, and takes hold of Adrian’s hand.

Before leaving the park, Adrian tells the boy, “Don’t do that.” He strains against Liza to stop her pulling him away. “Naughty, boy. Never do that. Not ever.”

The boy wails, and shoves his head beneath the woman’s—his mother’s—arm. She looks at Adrian and has the same lines Liza has. Liza gives a shake of her head, and tows Adrian into the street.

On the way to Liza’s house—she calls it home, but Adrian knows it’s not—she buys him an ice cream with strawberry sauce and a chocolate flake. The flake is yucky, so he throws it at a little girl with pigtails and blue ribbons. She shrieks when the ice cream slathered chocolate sticks to her face, and sobs as a dribble of red runs down her neck.

“Adrian!” Liza snaps, not an angry snap, just surprised. “You mustn’t do that.”

Adrian smiles. “I know. You must never cry. Mummy says so.”

Those lines are back on Liza’s face. Her eyes look shiny. Her hand squeezes Adrian’s. “It’s okay to cry, honey.”

He thinks about this on the journey to Liza’s house—not home like she says. *It’s okay to cry*. He remembers Mummy—her face furious and red, her fists clenched with strands of his hair caught between her fingers, bits of his skin buried under her nails—and doesn’t believe Liza, at all.



That night in his Thomas the Tank Engine room, Adrian is surrounded by the Thomas nightlight, bed sheets, and a poster of bright green Henry and bright red James. Liza sits on the edge of his bed.

"Tonight, our story is very special," she tells him. "It's about a boy who never, ever cries."

"A good boy," Adrian adds, and decides he will like this story—it sounds better than the one about the little boy whose mummy was wrong, and the little boy whose mummy didn't love him, and the little boy whose mummy was gone forever, and never coming back. But those lines are still on Liza's face. He doesn't like them, so he watches the Thomas nightlight instead.

"Once, there was a boy," Liza starts. "He was five years old."

"I'm five!" Adrian chimes in. Then mutters, "All the boys in *your* stories are five."

Liza smiles, he sees it from the corner of his eyes, but keeps his gaze on the Thomas nightlight.

"Yes, they are," she says. "But this one is extra special. This little boy never, ever cries. Not ever."

"A very good boy."

"You would think so, but he wasn't."

"He wasn't?"

"No, he threw a chocolate flake at a little girl."

Adrian pulls the bed sheets over his head. He doesn't like this story anymore.

"But that's okay." Liza's words come through the covers. "The boy didn't know it was naughty."

Adrian pokes his head out to look at Liza. "He didn't?"

"No, because his mummy never told him so."

Adrian tries to remember Mummy and what she said about being naughty. He thinks about the time he cut all of her hair off while she was sleeping. Afterwards he got a hug. About the time when he put the plug in the bath and filled it up until water started dripping through the kitchen ceiling. He got a lollypop. The time he played with next door's cat until it couldn't move anymore. Mummy said, "never mind," and took him to the duck pond.

"I don't think that boy was ever naughty," Adrian finally declares. "But crying . . . that was extra naughty."

That made Mummy shout, made the house tremble, and all the books fall out the book case. It put a crater in the garden. It turned his wardrobe and all his best toys into splinters and screwed up pieces of plastic. Made

Mummy scream and smack him and bellow, "Don't do that. Don't you ever do that!"

Tucked up with the Thomas nightlight, and Liza gone to one of the other rooms, Adrian lays awake in his Thomas room, in Liza's house that is not home like she says it is.

She told her story about the boy who never cried, not ever. He never cried, and that made him naughty—he did naughty things because he never cried. Then at the end of the story, he learned it was okay to cry. He cried lots, but only when he wanted to, and everything was good for him.

Adrian could only think one thought about that: Liza was wrong.



His dreams take him back to Mummy. To their house—proper home—not like Liza's house. Mummy is making silly faces that look nothing like the lines Liza wears more and more since Adrian came to live with her.

Mummy prods her tongue out at him, and uses it to touch the tip of her nose. Mummy goes cross-eyed, puffs out her cheeks, and wiggles her ears. She's so funny, Adrian rolls on the floor, and laughs until his sides ache.

That's when the nail stabs him. It is stuck up from the carpet, and it goes right into him. It hurts, it really hurts. He feels warmth and burning. His eyes sting. His breath is difficult to take.

It hurts.

It hurts.

And then the house is shaking, and things are spinning through the air. Mummy is red faced and screaming. She's coming at him, clawing, and ripping. Her head is thrown back. She's on the floor, writhing in circles. Thunder cracks, and lights go black.



"Wake up!" Liza's voice interrupts. Her hands pull him up, and proper home goes away. Adrian is back with Thomas the tank engine in Liza's house.

"It's okay," Liza hugs him. "You were just having a bad dream."

"It wasn't bad," Adrian says.

"It's okay." She's not listening. She rocks him to and fro. "Everything's okay now." She puts him at arm's length and says, "You can cry if you want to."

Adrian jerks away, and smacks her face. “No! You mustn’t do that. You must never do that.”

She tries to grab him, but Adrian jumps off the bed, and hides behind the toy chest, which is filled with toys that aren’t really his toys.

“Leave me alone, stupid lady!” he shouts. “You’re wrong. You’re all wrong. It’s not okay to cry.”

“It is,” Liza insists, and her voice sounds high pitched. “Your mummy was wrong. It’s just a mean thing she said to hurt you.”

“No!” Adrian is angry now, and he throws the Thomas nightlight at Liza.

It hits her head, before being stopped by the plug, and she falls to her knees. Her hands cover her face and its familiar lines. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Adrian sits and watches her. She is crying, and Mummy said never cry. Not ever. She was right, Liza is wrong. Silly Liza, and all those other people—Derek and Alison and their nice dog, Jumper. Wrong. Billy and his flat filled with lots of sweets. Very wrong. And Andy and Rebecca, and Carol. So many homes which weren’t really home. All wrong.

Adrian misses real home. He misses Mummy bad.

“I want to go back,” he tells Liza, as she sits on the floor, shoulders curled up, body shuddering.

She looks up—no lines on her face at all—and sniffs. “I’ll take you back in the morning.”

“Yay.” Adrian jumps up and down, and rushes to wish goodbye to Thomas, because he’s going home. Real home. But then Liza is saying, “They’ll just have to find someone else. Someone stronger and better than me.” She looks at the ceiling, her eyes not on Adrian. “They used to say I was the best.”

“They?” Adrian asks. He feels cold inside. “But I want to go to real home.”

Liza shakes her head. She has tears smudged cheeks. “You know you can’t.”

Adrian’s body grows colder, then hot. “But I want . . .”

“It’s gone,” Liza whispers. “Don’t you understand that?”

Adrian remembers Mummy red faced and screaming. He tries to think about what happened next, but only draws upon a place so empty and alone it hurts to concentrate on it.

Mummy is gone.

The house is gone, too.

He knows this.

Now there’s just him and a string of people who

shouldn’t be taking care of him, whose houses are not gone like home.

Liza reaches out and takes Adrian by the hand. “I’ll take you back tomorrow, okay?”

Adrian screams, “No!” He whirls from her fingers, and leaps onto the Thomas the tank engine bed.

Mummy. He wants her back. Wants her bad. Wants her now.

“I want to go home,” he cries. “I want my Mummy!”

“Don’t cry,” a voice made of silk whispers in his ear, but his body is shaking, his eyes burning.

“Don’t cry, don’t ever, ever cry.”

He tries not to. Tries to be a good boy, like Mummy wants him to be. But Liza is saying, “Your Mummy is gone, and you are never going home.”

He buries his face in his hands, and the walls start to shiver.

Liza is still talking. “We’ll go back tomorrow, and they’ll find someone new for you. Someone much better, much more capable than me.”

Adrian lets out a sob and the Thomas the tank engine things jump up and down on the spot. The bedspread screws into a ball. The nightlight swirls around the room, tethered by its plug. Bright green Henry and bright red James tear from the shuddering walls.

“Back tomorrow and . . .”

Adrian wails, and the roar of thunder drowns him out. Things are flying around his bedroom like the balls in a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos. Thomas the Tank engine is sizzling. Flames are springing from the carpet. The lights flicker, then the light bulbs shatter, and everything swims in orange fire.

Adrian weeps into his fingers. Wet tears cook on his face.

Don’t cry, don’t ever cry.

But he’s crying now, and Liza isn’t talking anymore.

“I want my Mummy back,” he sobs.

And Liza screams.

The flames rise higher, faster. The walls crumble bit by bit. The fire is bouncing and its glow opening up to form the jaws of a great black hole, a tunnel which licks its lips and snaps its teeth, and rises from the puddle of steaming tears that collects at Adrian’s feet. The steam mixes with smoke, as the house whines and whinges. The bed is a pile of sugary ash. Paper is crisp and curly on the walls, and Adrian no longer stands surrounded by flames, but is suspended midair, watching the hole—birthed from his tears—slurp up toys which aren’t really is toys. They spin and collide like Rice Krispies mixed with milk, then

vanish between the lips a place without light.

The room is gone, the house fast disappearing. Thomas the tank engine is no more, and Liza screams on and on, and louder and louder, as skin strips from her like orange peel. It ravel into kaleidoscope spirals, and slithers like windsock snakes into the hole.

Cryhole, thinks Adrian.

Liza glistens and dances. She looks like a string puppet Adrian once stripped the paint off of. Her eyes are running down her skinless face, and her tongue dripping and oozing between her teeth.

Adrian cries harder, and the cryhole grows, and gobbles up the house, and Liza. Soon he stands alone in an empty pit. Snot dangles from his nose. His eyes hurt, and his chest feels tight, and he is staring at nothing.

The house is gone.

Thomas the Tank Engine is gone.

And Liza is gone.



“ . . . AND NOW SHE OPENED HER MOUTH TO SCREAM AT THE LUNG, OR MAYBE SCREAM *HELP* TO THAT PERSON NEXT DOOR, BUT SHE COULDN'T BECAUSE HER THROAT WAS FULL AND SCRATCHY AS THOUGH SHE HAD SWALLOWED A BIRD'S NEST.”

SYNECDOCHE

Petersen Schoonover

THE FEET WERE ON THE CHAIR. There was no *body* with them; it was just a right foot and a left, resting like a pair of shoes on a department store rack.

Jenni screamed, the kind someone makes when taken by surprise. But she was in an unfamiliar, dark hotel room where things could meld and curl into what they weren't. Had she thrown her bra on the chair? She had, hadn't she? Those were the cups of her bra. That was it, yes. They were the cups of her bra.

She yanked the quilt over her face. It was her fourteenth job in as many weeks; she vowed this would be her last one and she was going to take a vacation—a *real* vacation. Her business, *Gone With the Wind*, ferreted urns to far-away places to spread ashes for families who didn't want to bother with the whole thing.

Some families wanted loved ones scattered in town where they grew up, dropped from airplanes during huge family picnics or spread at sea during sailboat races; edgier ones wanted the ashes fashioned into clay pots or varnished into the housings of grand pianos or porch furniture; still others, she'd read once, had their loved ones' ashes crammed into fireworks. Fireworks! None of *her* clients would do that. Her clients despised their

deceased loved ones, and so, *all expenses paid, thank you very much, I'll go and give your loved one an appropriate spreading wherever you desire so you don't have to feel guilty. Gone With the Wind*, indeed.

But there was no reason to be spooked by what was in the bright orange silk TSA-approved package sitting over there next to the wide-screen. She reminded herself that it was *supposed* to contain the ashes of a nasty old billionaire—one who had summered with three different mistresses at this very hotel before “dying of some weird all-over rot,” according to his daughter in an *Earth Day is Every Day* T-shirt—but that it *didn't*. There were no ashes in that urn. There were no ashes in *any* of the urns that she delivered.

Every urn she carried contained anywhere between five and a half to six and a half pounds of dirt.



At two a.m., Jenni awakened to the soft pad of something on the carpet.

She had thrown off the quilt and reached for it, to find that it felt heavy, as if there were a book on top of the covers. Had she been reading a book? No, she was sure

she hadn't been. She opened her eyes.

The feet were perched on her chest. The jagged nail on the right toe was crusted black with dried blood, and the left foot sprouted long, whip-like hairs.

She shrieked and dove for the bedside lamp, a cloisonné-looking thing bedecked in leering peacocks. The switch was on one of the beaks, and its sharp point bit her hand as she snapped on the light.

The feet were gone.

Someone banged on the wall, and the painting above her head reverberated. She jumped.

"Hey! Do you *mind*?"

"I'm okay!" she shot back.

She groped at the fluffy duvet cover, making certain the feet weren't hiding. The urn was still where she'd set it, next to another lamp in the shape of a toucan. She took a deep breath and thought she should go wash her face, take a shower . . . maybe it was just that she needed to feel *clean*. She *had* carried a box of dirt all this way, and she hadn't showered when she'd arrived, a ritual she almost never skipped . . . she traveled all over the world, and she'd become fond of the tiny rosemary soaps, bergamot-lime face masks and mandarin orange lotions. She didn't even know what types of delicately-wrapped goodies awaited her in this bathroom. That, *that* was the problem—she had interrupted her routine.

Dirt. *It's only dirt in that urn*, she reminded herself again.

She went into the bathroom, gripped the gleaming spigot, and turned on the water. In the spun gold basket next to the sink there was a bright pink bottle of face-wash, *VanillaRose*, it read, and she unscrewed the cap and lathered it on her hands, set it on her face. Vanilla was supposed to make you calm, after all; she'd heard somewhere that stewardesses wore it, even though she was pretty sure she'd never smelled it on any of the ones who'd served her cocktails recently. She could feel the tingle on her skin, the brush of feather dusters and rose petals. The vanilla part of the cream was fine; the rose, though, was cloying. Not at all like the scent of the robust roses at the farm, where her clients' loved ones were all enjoying retirement.

Grandma fed the prize marigolds, Aunt Kitty galvanized the corn maze, Uncle Ivan nourished the Golden Delicious. *Gone With the Wind* took a few thousand plus expenses from the families, then turned around and reaped a few bucks more from the "Featherbrook Farm—the Most Fruitful on the East Coast!" that took first every year for its triumphant tomatoes, burly butternut squash

and preternaturally perfect pumpkins. Nothing, Gerald said, nothing made his produce blossom like human remains, and half of her blushed whenever she thought about what she was doing.

Half of her felt guilty.

No, there wasn't anything wrong with the practice, she thought. She made some extra under the table, she fed the earth, and it wasn't as though she was disrespecting the families, those nasty, wealthy families. She was ceremonially doing what they'd paid her to do, staying in luxury hotels in far-away places so the ashes of their bastard loved ones could be spread in a manner appropriate to the amount of assets they'd had. It was certainly nothing worthy of being punished by a pair of spectral feet. Hah!

She bent over the sink and rinsed her face. She closed her eyes and groped for a towel, and when she stared at herself, an eye blinked back at her. It had been blue, once, maybe; it had a film over it and a skein of blood across its white.

A thousand birds beat in her chest and she clamored backwards, falling and striking her head on the towel bar. The towel fell over her face, and she gasped, pulling it off, spying the hotel logo in a flash of pink.

And then she passed out.



In the dream she was pawing at her ear because a bee had stung it, and when she opened her eyes she was on the floor of the bathroom. The ceramic tile was cold on her back, and her face was sun-burnt tight from the red heat lamp beating down on her.

A sharp pain splintered her ear and she swatted at what something there, something wet and soft—

—a mouth. Fat, moist, bruise-colored and crammed with rotting yellow teeth. "I don't belong here," the lips said. Blood trickled from its white-crusted corners and made a soft *spat* on the tile.

"Get out!" she shouted, struggling to reach up to the vanity for something, anything. She seized the china soap dish, and it fell to the tile and shattered. "Get out!" She hurled the shards at the mouth. "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

The mouth vanished.

From the bedroom, she could hear the neighbor banging again. "Knock it off or I'm calling the manager!"

"Sorry!" she shouted back. She didn't want that. Or maybe she did. What would the manager see if he came

here? He would see the soap dish, and she would be charged for it.

And he would see all the blood. Speckled on her nightgown, smeared on the tiles. In one puddle there was the impression of three toes on her right foot.

She gripped the edge of the vanity and helped herself to stand, and when she peered in the mirror, she saw blood running down her neck. Her ear, throbbing, was bleeding.

The lips bit me.

She stumbled from the bathroom, and something grabbed her ankle—a hand, its dirty nails long and curling into themselves. She tried screaming but all that came out was a pathetic yelp, and pain shot through her knee and thigh as she tugged to break free, but the thing tightened its grip. She seized the door jamb to give her leverage, but instead she lost her balance and fell, landing on the floor with a thud.

Now the hand had a mate, and it grabbed her other ankle.

“Let go!” she heard herself say, and then was surprised to hear sobbing from her own mouth, *let go, let go please, please, please . . .* she closed her eyes and willed them to let go, like she had often willed herself warm by imagining she was laying on her back in a sun-drenched garden, which always worked, sometimes she could even smell the sunflowers, but not this time. This time her willing them to disappear wasn’t working. Near her was the suitcase stand, leaning against the corner, something she’d never seen much use for. She groped for it, seized one of its metal dowels, and dragged it, whacking her own leg and shrieking in pain when she felt a stab and heard the crack of her shin.

She heaved the heavy stand over her head and came down again on both of her ankles.

The things curled up and slithered away like garter snakes.

For a few minutes she lay on the rug between the door to blessed escape and the room; she found she couldn’t move her legs, because when she tried, it was as though someone had bound them in bed sheets. She bit her lip and focused on the carpet, on the pattern, its curlicue feathers, orange and yellow and brown. She dug her elbows into the pile and pulled herself toward the desk, the desk with the urn.

She was certain that whatever was happening to her had something to do with that urn. And she didn’t care anymore what balance the family had paid, the dirt was going. It was going *now*. Into the toilet, where, when it

met the water, it would turn to cement-paste like the voracious lahars on Mount Saint Helens.

She was aware of her breathing; loud and wheezy, like small quantities of air forced out of a bag with a pin hole. It frightened her; she held her breath.

She could still hear it.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m not looking,” she said, but it came out as a choking sob. Tears were in her, an overwhelming sadness. In her head she had a vision of someone rotting in a hospital bed, watching the door for a visitor, and no matter how much that person called or begged, no one ever came, and she saw a long night, a watch kept on the sodium light outside the window. It was all so much sorrow and the sobs coming out of her throat were mingled, mingled with irregular breathing that was not her own. She opened her eyes.

Before her swelled a pair of blackened, yellowed lungs.

Something thick was in her throat. She coughed and tried to breathe, she’d been here before, once, in third grade, or maybe it was second. She’d had an apple for lunch and she was laughing with her friends, they were sharing jokes, bad ones, about the guy who’d run his wife through a wood chipper, and then . . . she couldn’t breathe. Her face had burned, and she had been choking and people had been slamming her on the back and she remembered focusing at the mauve Formica table-top and eventually out came the piece of apple, a little larger than a few teeth . . . and now she opened her mouth to scream at the lung, or maybe scream *help* to that person next door, but she couldn’t because her throat was full and scratchy as though she had swallowed a bird’s nest.

She made a fist with her left hand and punched at it, and it popped into nothingness, like a balloon.

Her elbows were stinging with rug-burn. She could move her legs now, but when she did, something was hot in the shin bones. She seized the desk chair and began to haul herself up, but wobbled when she was half-standing, and she reached for the bright orange urn.

She fell to the floor, the lamp, the urn, the chair, all of it tumbling, and the urn spilled open and out poured *real ashes*. She knew them from their smell, that burnt-smell, like flour cooking on a burner and wood smoke. An old boyfriend had said that about wood, wood turned to ashes but it didn’t become any less or more than it was as a solid. It was the same wood, only in a different form, and how had she grabbed the wrong urn? She was sure she had scooped it out with that pewter scoop she used, like the kind you find in candy stores, she could

remember doing it. She could remember doing it.

And then she remembered, no, the man's ashes were taken out of a bright red urn not an orange one.

So who was this person?

She felt like she was going to throw up, and she forced herself to roll over on her back only to see a bloated stomach over her, a hairy bloated stomach with a pale white spot on it, as though someone had shaved there, shaved there to put some kind of tape or something on it . . .

Someone was knocking on the door.

"Hello in there?" *Knock, knock, knock, knock.* "Hello, is everything all right?"

She tried to answer, but nothing came out. All she felt was that lump of apple, burning with bile around its edges.



“SHE HESITATES UNTIL I TAP HER FOREHEAD WITH
THE COLD BARREL OF MY SHOTGUN—THE ONE
UNCLE RANDY GAVE ME FOR MY TWENTY FIFTH
BIRTHDAY.”

ELLY'S SATIN SHEETS

Daniel P. Coughlin

I CAME HERE ON A WHIM after I found Elly sucking another man's cock in our bed. The tip of her tongue was tickling his shaft as he gently held her hair back for her. Their bodies glistened with sweat and they seemed so natural. That was all I could stand to watch. My stomach clenched up tight and I had to leave. My head began to pound and I became faint. I remember walking into the kitchen and looking for something; I don't know what because everything was hazy and I felt dizzy. The next thing I recall is that I'm six miles outside of Cedar Rapids on my way to the cabin that Elly and I built two years after we married. I like to come here when I'm stressed. I guess that's why I came.

Oh yeah . . . the other man—it's coming back to me now—he sold us the cabin. He had that smug smile that only a salesman knows how to wear. He had black hair and he was young. I remember not liking the way he looked at my wife. Images start flowing into my head like successive punches from a boxer. Now it makes sense—the late night shopping, the nights out with the girls, and the lack of sex . . . for me at least. And goddamn if I can't help what's happening now—my dick is getting erect at the thought of another man fucking my wife, pushing her down so that she can lap at his cock with her

tongue. The images are really turning me on. My heart is about to explode, but somehow I'm more turned on than I've ever been. Other images keep pouring into my mind; in the kitchen, grabbing the twelve gauge from the back closet near the basement stairs, just to the left of the coat rack where Elly hangs her red blazer. Then more fucking, but not real fucking because now I'm holding my shotgun to his face and screaming at Elly to keep sucking his cock. She does, and then I tell her to bite it off. She hesitates until I tap her forehead with the cold barrel of my shotgun—the one Uncle Randy gave me for my twenty fifth birthday. Blood begins to pulsate and color the sheets on the bed and her face carmine red; it drips from her upper lip, in thin beads—she wears a mask of horror. Then his screams become annoying. He's holding what's left of his member, and Elly's mouth looks red and it reminds me of a clown's mouth. Now I see myself wanting to masturbate but the power over them is too much and I prefer to maintain this sick kind of control over them.

My attention is turned to the trunk of my car when I hear loud thumping and pounding on the hood from the inside. My wife is screaming and then more images float across my mind. She's in the trunk with him. They're

naked but not tied up. I'm pulling into the driveway and parking around the back of the cabin, near the pine trees. I can hear the tires of my Acura running over pinecones in the gravel drive—crunch, pop, crunch, pop. Now I'm smiling as I force them to exit the trunk. My wife still looks sexy, even though she's scared so badly that her glistening and tanned skin has turned ashen. The half-dickless salesman makes a run for it, and then I'm firing a round at him. The castrated prick is hit in the back and his skin peels back creating a rigid crater down low on his back, near his left love handle. The scent of fresh pine is seeping into my nostrils and creates a pleasant euphoria. Lying on his stomach, covered in mud and fallen leaves, the dickless shot-up fuck continues to crawl through dried pine needles, which are turning a rich, bloody port color in his slow moving wake. And there is Elly, whimpering, shocked, wide eyed and beautiful. I tell her to grab the rope from the trunk, and she does as she is told. Then I push her toward the salesman. Now she's following orders, tying the rope around his neck. She screams for help even though she knows our nearest neighbor is four miles away. Orders are to pull tight on the rope and she shakes her head no, so I shoot the salesman in the shoulder. The weak bastard tries to scream but nothing comes out—the rope is too tight around his neck. Blood sprays across his upper chest and shoulder layering on like a second coat of gloss finish—dark brown all over. I get sick of watching her half-assed attempts, so I grab the rope and throw it over a strong branch on the maple tree to my left. Now I'm pulling him up. There's really no hope for the dumb bastard and he looks silly flailing his wretched arms through the air and trying to grab the rope closing off his airway. Eye contact ensues between shithead and Elly. It's kind of cute—how sad they are for each other and then he goes limp. The heat ridden bitch tries to go to him, mumbling softly until the wooden butt of my shotgun slams into the side of her head ripping her skin jaggedly from the top of her forehead near the hairline to the bottom of her face near the jaw. Blood runs heavily across her nose and cheeks and a faint cracking noise beneath her skin tells me I've fractured her skull.

Inside the house—the bedroom to be exact—each of her four limbs are tightly bound to the bedposts and I fuck her for hours in the missionary position. The duration of this fuckfest has no effect on my hard cock. Who the hell needs Viagra? Afterward she cries and so I strangle her. She looks beautiful, sexy. But then I'm turned off because she shits the bed and then I hear the

muffled gush of urine flush out from her bladder onto the satin sheets that she insisted on buying.

In my whole godforsaken life I've never had a better sexual experience and it feels so good that I put the shotgun barrel into my mouth and pull the trigger before I have a chance to feel guilty.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

COVER ART BY ARTHUR WANG.

The piece is titled: “Aless”

This is the biographical blurb from Arthur's homepage (www.ArthurWangArt.com):

Me! What about me?

When I was a wee little boy, I drew trains and planes with explosive and toxic cargo crashing into each other. In grade school, I drew tanks and armies on one side of a sheet of paper, and have a partner draw his own army on the other. After the drawing was done, we never quite figured out how to actually start playing the game, but it was fun setting up.

Now, I find myself an art major. I doubted it would happen back in high school. Homicide investigator, park ranger, botanist, pediatrician, and paramedic were initially my ideas for a career. When my art teacher got mad at me for dropping art class, though, I decided to second guess myself.

With 3 covers, a handfull of personal commissions, and being published another 3 times in magazines at the age of 20, I think art may have been the right direction. We'll see what happens. :)

BACKPAGE AND INTERIOR COVER
ART BY DIANA MAGALLÓN
AND JEFF CROUCH.

Jeff approached me last year about publishing some of his artwork and in all of the excitement it just slipped my mind. Now is the time to shed some light on his artwork. Here is some info he sent me and a dialogue that

we exchanged while wrangling the details of procuring some of his artwork.

Diana Magallón is an experimental artist:
www.cipollinaaaaa.blogspot.com

Riot Wrong (e-book in collaboration with Jeff Crouch) is a summary of an exhaustive search of narrative visual resources, exploiting all the available means: classic skills, digital painting, photo and experimentation with new materials: <http://ungovernablepress.weebly.com/>

Jeff Crouch is an internet artist in Grand Prairie, Texas. Google him and/or check out his current project at Famous Album Covers:
www.famousalbumcovers.blogspot.com.

Together, they use art to create an intense experience.

I inquired about some biographical info: “. . . I would need some sort of autobiographical blurb about yourself, even if it is that you like to live in the mountains and your favorite food is cornbread.”

Jeff replied with this: “. . . I don't live in the mountains, but I tend to eat cornbread with beans, the beans being a source of socially discomfiting gastronomic activity. Thus I tend not to eat much cornbread, yet if I lived in the mountains, my gastronomic activity might be healthier. My internet connection, however, would probably be more sporadic than it is. Yes, here is my bean-less current project: <http://famousalbumcovers.blogspot.com>”

I responded thus: “. . . I really enjoyed your rant about the beans, cornbread, and flatulence in the mountains. I needed a good laugh. Love your artwork too, by the way. It has a certain uniqueness that is contagious. Reminds me of something . . . oh yeah . . . Picasso after a few psilocybin mushrooms while listening to the Doors. Hey! Keep up the good work.”



to do list:
NOTHING

